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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 13

Looking On The Bright Side Is Depressing

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson (March 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com
Editor's note: this volume features what is likely the first time Lina uses the Giga slave.

Looking On The Bright Side Is Depressing (Part 1)

It all started with a scene you see all too often.

"Hey, you! Don't you go lookin' down on us!" "Thinking we're just nice guys and getting cocky, huh?"

It was a serene early afternoon. On a certain street in a certain town, a group of thugs were picking a pointless fight with someone, trying to shake them down for cash and valuables—the kind of mundane, everyday scenery you could practically call a seasonal tradition.

And, on the day when the person they happened to be tangling with was *me*—Lina Inverse, warrior and genius sorceress—the scene that follows is pretty much a foregone conclusion.

I began chanting a spell under my breath— "Windy Shield!"

Zubogoom!

"GUWAAHHHHH!?"

With a single spell, the thugs were sent flying— "...Eh...?" I muttered involuntarily, standing there in a daze. The blow that had just scattered them wasn't mine. It was delivered by the owner of a deep, boisterous voice coming from the side.

"Hah-hah-hah-hah-hah! That was a close one!"

Raising a massive laugh in that thick voice, a sturdy, large-framed man in his late twenties or early thirties stepped out from the crowd. He wore rough, plain clothes that looked easy to move in, and his black hair was cropped short.

...Well, even if this middle-aged guy hadn't stepped in, I would have just blown those thugs away myself, but as a general rule of social etiquette, one is supposed to offer thanks in these situations.

"...Ah... thank you... very much."

"Hah-hah-hah! No need for thanks. I was simply fulfilling my duty."

As I gave a polite little bow, the guy started laughing again—for God knows what reason—and said something completely nonsensical.

"Well, in any case. From here on out, I look forward to working with you, Lina Inverse-kun."

..... "...Huh?"

Being told "I look forward to working with you" with such a beaming smile made me knit my brows in spite of myself. ...I mean... even if you suddenly tell me that... And first of all, why does this guy even know my name...?

As I stood there frozen, the guy clapped his hands together once. "Oh! Come to think of it, I haven't introduced myself yet. I am Goras Zenomode. I've been appointed as your tutor. So, I'm looking forward to it!"

".....Yes...?"

At the man's words, my eyes turned into dots.

"Hah-hah-hah. Lina-kun, I've heard all about you! Good rumors, bad rumors, all sorts of things. Though I suppose there are more of the bad ones? Hah-hah-hah-hah!"

Deciding that talking in the street was inconvenient, he led me to a nearby eatery. The guy calling himself Goras opened with that line immediately.

"Well, Lina-kun, you have your own way of living, and I think that's fine in its own way, but there are people who worry about such things, you see."

"...And...?" Still not quite following the conversation, I urged Goras to continue.

"In short: the Chairman of the Council for the Kurandall City Mages' Association, which I belong to, happens to be one of those people. The Chairman is worried. He thinks that if you, Lina-kun, continue to indulge in your 'atrocious and villainous' behavior as much as you please, it won't just be your reputation at stake—it'll drag down the public image of all mages."

"...Atrocious and villainous...?"

"And so! It was decided that you must be educated to become a sensible, upright mage. And I have been sent here as the tutor to handle that education."

"...Wai... Wait just a minute!" I snapped, glaring at Goras.

"What is that supposed to mean!? *I'm* ruining the reputation of all mages? Not that I'm saying that's *impossible*, but that's beside the point! Deciding on your own to 'educate' me and unilaterally forcing a tutor on me—that is the definition of minding someone else's business! No matter how you look at it, it's insane! What about *my* opinion or *my* position in all this!?"

Goras listened to my rebuttal, nodding along at every point, before saying: "Hah-hah-hah-hah.

Don't be silly, Lina-kun. There’s no such thing."

"Don't say that so cheerfully!"

"Now, now, calm down." Goras began greedily scarfing down the food that had been brought to the table. "I understand you're feeling shy. You need to be more honest with yourself."

"...Old man..." Hearing a line that sounded like it came from a cheap friendship story about knights that was popular ten years ago made me move past rejection into a sense of total exhaustion.

"Hah-hah-hah. Lina-kun, 'Old man' is a bit much. You can call me 'Teacher' from now on."

"NO WAAAY!"

Despite my soul-felt protest, Goras didn't even change his expression. He continued munching on his meal and said: "Now, now. —Oh, I just had a great idea. As a sign of our new friendship, and as a 'tuition fee' for your teacher, how about you pick up the check for this meal, Lina-kun?"

.....Heh-heh-heh-heh... In that instant, I realized: It’s useless to talk to people like this. And if talking is useless, there’s only one thing left to do! I began chanting a spell under my breath— "Windy Shield!"

Zugodowa-nn!

—However— The blow that blew Goras away wasn't mine; it was released by Goras himself—!

"...So?" After dashing out of the exploded restaurant and making sure there was no one chasing us, I questioned Goras once we had settled down. "What was that all about just now?"

"Hm? 'Just now'?"

"I mean back at the restaurant, when you blasted yourself with an attack spell. I’m asking what on earth you were thinking by doing that."

"Hah-hah-hah. Isn't it obvious, Lina-kun? A moment ago, you were about to cast a spell on your teacher, weren't you?"

"Of course! When someone says something that incredibly selfish, any girl would want to fire off at least one spell."

"That’s exactly why. My original purpose for being sent here is to 'prevent you from causing any more trouble and damaging the image of mages.' Therefore, if the Teacher does the same

thing with a spell *before* you can fire yours off, the goal is achieved!"

".....I... wonder about that... I have a feeling that whether it's me or you doing it, the reputation of mages is going to drop either way…"

"...Well... Setting that aside... I have absolutely NO intention of recognizing you as my tutor! So just go back quietly to that association in whatever-city!"

"Hah-hah-hah. Don't say that, Lina-kun. You might be confused at first, but hey, don't worry. Teacher will definitely reform you into a proper, honest mage!"

"...Reform...?"

"It'll be fine. Education is love! If you approach everything with love, you can achieve anything!"

"...He... Hey, listen..." *Hauuu*... I let out a deep sigh at the man's words. "...First of all, do you really think a person so 'by-the-book'—someone who says something as incredibly cliché as 'Education is love'—can actually educate people with all sorts of different personalities?"

"Hah-hah-hah! You don't need to worry, Lina-kun! Despite how I look, Teacher is actually quite confident in his own 'individuality'! So even if my words are cliché, the content is anything but! As proof, my previous lover ran away from me saying, 'Your love is twisted!'"

...No... even if you say that with such a dignified attitude... For starters, I feel like *that* is a huge problem in its own right...

"Anyway, Lina-kun! You don't need to worry about any of that! Because regardless of what you say or think, Teacher is going to follow you and educate you whether you like it or not! Hah-hah-hah-hah!"

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa."

Faced with such a clear and cheerful declaration, I couldn't help but clutch my head and groan.

"Hah-hah-hah. Lina-kun. You're holding your fork wrong." "Hah-hah-hah. Lina-kun. When walking on the road, you have to stay to one side or you'll be a nuisance to others." "Hah-hah-hah. Lina-kun. When bullying bandits, you have to keep going until they can't move anymore, otherwise it's dangerous." Et cetera, et cetera...

"SHUT UUUUUUP!!"

I finally screamed during lunch that day. It happened when he pointed out that the angle of

my knife while cutting my pork sauté was "too shallow."

I mean, this guy was following me around constantly, nitpicking everything I did. When I launched a night raid on some bandits to relieve stress, he had somehow gotten ahead of me, fired off a spell before I could, and then started lecturing me again. There was no way I wouldn't be stressed.

"Oh? What's the matter, Lina-kun?"

"Don't 'What's the matter, Lina-kun' me! I want you to cut it out already!"

"You're in quite a bad mood, Lina-kun. If something is bothering you, try telling Teacher."

"Fine! Then I'll say it! To begin with, your very existence is what's bothering me! You're always wanting to shout toward the sunset for no reason, or shout toward the sea, or just self-destructing all over the place!"

"Hah-hah-hah-hah. What are you talking about, Lina-kun? If Teacher didn't self-destruct, you'd be the one firing off attack spells, wouldn't you?"

"MINE IS FINE!!"

I screamed with all my might. One of the ways I communicate with others is to "fire off an attack spell as a retort," but there are rules to this—case-by-case, you know? For close friends, a *Dill Brand*. For acquaintances, a *Bomb Di Wind*. For a playful party joke, a shy but firm *Raywing*. For the outdoors, a nature-friendly *Dragon Slave*—things like that.

However—this guy. When it came to attack spells, it seemed he could only handle *Windy Shield*. Every time he "self-destructed," it was *Windy Shield*. It's a spell that explodes a mass of high-pressure air; it can easily destroy a flimsy table. In other words: while I make an effort to only blow away my target, when this guy does it, the people around him are guaranteed to get caught in it. Considering it doesn't even help relieve *my* stress, it was a very troubling problem.

"And more than anything! Every little thing I do, you just keep complaining and complaining without ever getting tired of it!"

"Hah-hah-hah-hah. It can't be helped. After all, Teacher is Lina-kun's tutor." He showed his sparkling teeth and gave a broad grin.

"What are you TALKING about!? What you're doing isn't 'education,' it's just 'complaining'!"

"Well, that's Teacher's educational policy."

"Don't just write it off as an 'educational policy'! First of all, whether the angle of my knife is shallow or not, there's no way that has anything to do with my life or the reputation of

mages!"

"Now, now, you never know. Even a giant fortress can crumble from a tiny crack."

"AS IF!!"

I screamed involuntarily. Normally, this is where I'd fire off an attack spell, but if I showed even a hint of doing that, the old man would react instantly and blow himself up. That wouldn't relieve any stress. In that case, what on earth should I...? Just as I was thinking that—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It's rare to see you with a man, Lina Inverse!"

Gogan. At the sound of that idiotic laughter coming from the doorway, I collapsed face-first onto the table.

"...U... uaaaaaa..." Groaning, I managed to push myself up and look back toward the voice. But I didn't even need to check. There stood a silhouette dressed in a strange costume, thrusting her chest out for no reason! My self-proclaimed rival and total leech: Naga the White Serpent! Nuaaaaa! Why did a complicated person have to show up in an already complicated situation!?

"...W... What...!?" Looking away from Goras, who had cried out in surprise, I took a sip of herbal tea and said: "...An... acquaintance... sort of..."

"...How... lovely..."

Pfft!

At the old man's muttered words, I accidentally sprayed my tea right across the table. ...L... Lovely...? Old man... By the time I turned back to retort, Goras was gone—

"Well now. Hahaha. Are you called Naga-san?" The old man's deep voice came from behind—near the shop's entrance. I turned around to see him standing before Naga (God knows when he moved).

"And you are?"

"Yes! I am Goras Zenomode, sent from Kurandall City as Lina-kun's tutor! My, I had no idea Lina-kun had such a wonderful... —Ah! No! My apologies! It's nothing! Aha... ahahahaha!" Goras answered Naga's question stumblingly. ...I don't care about anything else, just stop blushing, old man.

"Heh. I see." Naga shot a curious, amused glance toward me. "I understand, Goras-san. If that's the case, I, Naga the White Serpent, shall offer my cooperation as well."

"Oh! That would be a great help!" Goras nodded at Naga's words. Oooo... Oh you, Naga! You're planning to tease me because it’s someone else's problem, aren't you!? ...Alright... if that’s how you want to play it, I’ll take you on for real! No matter what weird interference you try, I’ll reject it loud and clear! Watching Naga and Goras chatting away, I made a firm vow in my heart.

"Now, Lina-kun. Wear this." The next morning. In my room at the inn before we set out. My firm resolution wilted away the moment I saw the costume Goras was holding out with a bright smile.

It was obvious to anyone who saw it: it was designed by Naga. The color was black! The amount of skin shown was pointlessly high! The shoulder guards were modeled after animal skulls! The fact that there were pads built into the chest area made me feel a genuine surge of murderous intent.

...Well... the clothes are one thing... actually, they aren't okay at all, but I could sort of understand it knowing Naga. —However—the sight of a sturdy, athletic-type middle-aged man happily holding out such an item was more unbearable than one could imagine.

...Uh... Uhm... Even if I survive this moment, is this kind of attack going to continue forever...? Thinking about it made even me feel like making a run for it. But even if I ran, this guy and Naga would surely sense my location and come after me. I had no evidence, but I felt it in my gut.

...I... if that’s the case, I have no choice! I’ll use my secret technique: The Art of Switching the Problem Before Anyone Notices!

"...Na... Naga designed those clothes, didn't she...?" At my exhausted question, Goras replied with a cheerful smile: "No, no. Teacher worked very hard to design these for you, Lina-kun. ...Well... although the moment Naga-san stepped in as 'supervisor,' the original white one-piece dress was changed slightly into this."

What kind of "supervision" is that? It doesn't even retain its original shape. Several retorts flashed through my mind instantly, but I held them back. "Naga’s supervision... huh... So you have a lot of respect for Naga, old man?"

At my teasing tone, Goras looked away. "W... What are you saying? It’s true that... Naga-san is a wonderful woman. That’s why Teacher simply wants you to become a woman like her, Lina-kun..."

LIKE HELL I WILL!! I managed to swallow the scream that almost escaped my throat. "Simply put... you like women like Naga?"

"W... What are you saying, Lina-kun!? Don't tease your teacher!"

"But—you don't *dislike* her, do you?"

"...W... Well, I suppose..." He blushed slightly. Alright! He fell for it! Plan: Use the fact that the old man likes Naga to turn his attention toward her and away from "educating" me!

"Hey. Specifically, what do you like about Naga?"

"...Spe... Specifically...? Well..." The old man hesitated a bit at my question. "...Her chest... I guess?"

"...Ugh... you honest bastard..." This time, it actually came out of my mouth.

"W... What are you saying, Lina-kun! Teacher doesn't mean it in a weird way! You know how they say, 'A man needs guts, a woman needs bust. The bigger the difference between top and under, the better!'"

"Who says that and where!?"

"I said it openly at the Kurandall Mages' Association!"

...I... see... "...A-Anyway, so you like Naga for her chest size...?"

"Of course it's not just the chest! That form overflowing with elegance!" ...I wonder if this old man even knows what the word "elegance" means...

"And that cheerful laugh!" ...If he's referring to that idiotic cackling, I feel like it’s less "cheerful" and more "having crossed the line"...

"And that outstanding fashion sense, and her oozing individuality!" I won't deny that. Though in a bad way. But well, putting aside the old man's questionable taste for now...

"In short: you like Naga?"

"...W...!? What are you saying, Lina-kun! ...Well... of course it’s not that I dislike her... But that’s only as a role model for your life, or, well..."

"I heard that already. You don't have to hide it. If you like her, you should just go for it. Be a man and go *boom*!" I egged him on irresponsibly. Whether he hooks up with Naga or gets dumped and heartbroken, either way, he’ll stop paying attention to me... hopefully!

"...B... But... Teacher has the important duty of being your tutor, Lina-kun..."

"But before you're my tutor, you're a human being, aren't you!?"

"...!?" The old man groaned at my words. This phrase "Before being [X], you're a human being" is actually used most often by selfish people, but because it sounds good, most people don't realize that.

"...T... That is true... but..." The old man, indeed not noticing, began to look conflicted. Alright! One more push!

"Besides, even if you say you're 'educating' me, you won't be able to focus if you're constantly thinking about Naga, right? That's why you should settle things with her first."

"...Do you... think so?"

"I do! Go for it, old man! Go, go! I'll help as much as I can!"

"But... even if you say that, how should I go about it...!" The old man scratched his head. YES! He fell for it! Since the line "How should I go about it" came out, his head is already filled with thoughts of hitting on Naga! From here on, it's all mine! Now I just have to play along.

"Let's see... well, if you suddenly say 'I like you,' she'll just be confused... So first, you have to appeal to her."

"An appeal, huh..."

"Exactly! First, show her what a useful, 'good man' you are!"

"I see! In that case, Lina-kun, sorry to ask so soon, but I'd like your cooperation."

"Okay, what is it?" I answered casually. The old man gave a beaming smile, held out the clothes again, and said: "If you wear this, I can appeal my high ability as an educator—"

"DON'T BRING THE CONVERSATION BACK TO THAT!!"

Bogwawawa-nn!

Before I could even fire a spell, Goras had self-destructed as usual.

"I see. So that explains the explosion." "Hah-hah-hah-hah. That's how it is, Naga-san. Well, Lina-kun is at a difficult age, after all."

After Goras self-destructed and we dashed out of the inn (which now had a broken room), we were gathered around a breakfast table at a nearby eatery. Of course, Goras skipped the part about "approaching Naga" and simply framed it as "Lina-kun didn't want to wear the clothes and tried to fire a spell, so I self-destructed first." Beside them, I shoveled down my breakfast

in a foul mood.

"Hmph. Lina really is a handful. She should learn a thing or two from me." ...Twitch...

"Hah-hah-hah. Naga-san, compared to a wonderful woman like you, it would be too cruel to expect the same from Lina-kun." ...Twitch, twitch!

"Heh. I suppose that's true." "Hah-hah-hah-hah." "Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Twitch-twitch-twitch-twitch! Gatan! I kicked my chair back and stood up— "Earth Bomb!" (*Jirai-ha!*)

Dudooooo-nn!

In that instant, the thing that blew our table away wasn't my spell, nor Goras's self-destruction, and certainly not Naga.

"...W...!?" Avoiding a direct hit by a hair's breadth, I scanned the area. The eyes of every customer in the shop were on us. That was only natural, since an explosion had just happened. —However— Among the many gazes watching us, I found one that was different from the rest.

"—!?"

It was the gaze of a single woman sitting at a table near the entrance. She didn't look surprised that an explosion had occurred. She was clearly watching to see what we would do next. She looked to be in her early twenties. She was a beauty with shoulder-length black hair, a slender build, and loose white clothes. It was a face I didn't recognize, but—

"You!?" *Grattle-clatter-crash!* Rising from under the wreckage of the blown-up table, Goras cried out.

"An acquaintance?" Naga, who should have been blown away but had somehow revived soundlessly, stood next to Goras and asked. But before the old man could answer—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! How you have fallen, Goras! To have such a 'nonsense woman' clinging to your side—how dare you talk so grandly about 'education' and the like! You have no right to call yourself an educator!"

Leaving her table and walking over, she looked down on the old man with a gaze of absolute contempt and spoke clearly.

"D... Did you just say 'nonsense woman'!?" Naga erupted beside the old man. YES! Go for it, unknown lady! I don't know the circumstances, but tell him more! Involuntarily, I cheered for her in my heart. But the lady completely ignored Naga's voice, keeping her eyes fixed on

Goras.

"...You... Kasha! Why are you here!?"

"...That should be obvious..." The woman called Kasha let a small smile play on her lips. She then turned toward me, gave a polite bow, and said:

"You are Lina Inverse-san, I presume? Nice to meet you. I am Kasha Flanagan. I have been sent by the Disciplinary Committee of the Kurandall City Mages' Association to replace the failed educator Goras Zenomode as your tutor."

—And there it was. ...Hey, wait a minute. You people—

(To be continued in: Looking On The Bright Side Is Depressing Part 2)

Next Episode Preview

The second assassin—er, tutor—has finally appeared before Lina!

Just what is Kasha's educational philosophy!? Can Lina overcome this new ordeal!?

And, though it's honestly not that important, what will be Goras's fate!?

The ambitious masterpiece of the year depicting the conflict on the front lines of education, the #1 American hit: "Looking on the bright side is depressing" (Part 2)!

Wait for it while worrying about the mold during the rainy season! (What kind of teaser line is *that*?)

Looking On The Bright Side Is Depressing (Part 2)

Synopsis

Unable to stand by and watch Lina’s daily misdeeds, the Kurandall City Mages' Association has dispatched a tutor to re-educate her: Goras Zenomode, a man with an annoying smile and sparkling white teeth!

Harassed by this self-proclaimed "Teacher" and with Naga joining the fray, Lina is driven to the brink of a full-scale rampage!

But then, a second tutor sent from Kurandall, Kasha, appears before them!

What will happen this time!?

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Goras's voice echoed through the silent restaurant. He pointed a finger sharply at Kasha, who met him with a gaze full of hostility.

"I cannot overlook the claim that I am a failure as an educator!"

"It doesn't matter if you overlook it or not; it's a fact. 'Education is love'? If such platitudes actually worked, the world wouldn't be so difficult. Lina-san, would *you* want to receive an education where you're constantly nagged while someone repeats the word 'love' at every opportunity?"

Suddenly pulled into the conversation, I blinked.

"...Eh... well, no, that doesn't sound very pleasant... but more importantly, about my—"

"See! You see!?"

Completely cutting off my rising protest, Kasha continued in a triumphant tone.

"Education that inflicts pain on the recipient is nothing more than a sham! Forced love is merely the justification of self-satisfaction! To achieve the normalization of character and behavior without accompanying pain—is that not what true education should be!? Lina-san, surely you would like to receive *that* kind of education, wouldn't you!?"

"No... I think I'm perfectly fine just the way I am..."

“That’s going a bit too far.”

Kasha, Goras, and even Naga all shook their heads in unison.

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

"Regardless!"

Kasha patted my shoulder.

"The education I aim for—and have practiced—is exactly that! It allows for the correction of character and bad habits, and the accumulation of knowledge, all without causing the recipient any unpleasant feelings or unnecessary hardship! Don't you think this is true education!? Lina-san!"

"Practiced...? You mean you can actually *do* that!?"

"I can!"

Kasha nodded firmly.

Hmm. Setting aside whether I’d actually take this "education," that sounds pretty revolutionary.

"How do you do it, exactly?"

In response to my curious question, she pulled a small crystalline mass from her pocket with a look of great pride.

"I researched this with an acquaintance and completed it: the Crystal Chip! Simply by embedding this into the subject's head, they instantly become an honest, obedient human being!"

"WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION IS THAT!?"

Dogashaaa!

My retort-corkscrew punch sent Kasha flying.

"...Wh... What was that for, Lina-san!?"

"Don't 'What was that for' me! Where exactly is the 'true education' in that!?" I shouted as Kasha stood up and approached me.

"It’s perfectly fine! It doesn't even hurt when I embed it!"

"It's not about whether it hurts! That’s not education; that’s just controlling someone with a puppet spell!"

"What are you saying!? In the sense that you are forcing your own values onto the other

person, education and puppetry are practically the same thing! If that’s the case, choosing the quickest method is for the benefit of both parties!"

"LIKE HELL IT IS!!"

"I have real-life examples! Troubled youths who frequently caused incidents like assault have, through my education, transformed into completely different, respectable individuals in the blink of an eye! Currently, following my advice and the spirit of service, they are diligently engaged in manual labor without pay or complaint!"

"The rest of the world calls that 'brainwashing and forced labor'!"

"How dare you! Even their families are letting out screams of joy, saying 'Give me back my son!'"

"THOSE ARE SCREAMS OF PROTEST! And first of all! There’s no point in education if you ignore the person’s personality and individuality!"

"You cannot gain something without losing something!"

"THEY'RE LOSING TOO MUCH!!"

"Hah-hah-hah! It seems the match is decided!"

Goras's laughter rang out, cutting off Kasha as she tried to argue further. He glared directly at her.

"Kasha-kun! Your educational policy is indeed mistaken! The proof is that Lina-kun chose me as her teacher instead of you!"

"Wait just a second! I don't recall ever recognizing you as my teacher, old man!"

"What are you saying, Lina-kun? Rejecting Kasha-kun’s education means you have recognized me as your teacher!"

"NO IT DOESN'T! Don't turn this into a forced choice! There’s an option for 'I don't recognize either of you'!"

"Your teacher will not permit that."

"I don't need your permission!" I screamed.

...Seriously... what kind of place is this Kurandall Mages' Association that keeps sending people like this...?

Meanwhile, Naga took advantage of the fact that the conversation no longer involved her to focus entirely on devouring the food being served.

...That... cursed woman! Eating all the food by herself!

In that brief moment of distraction, Goras turned back to Kasha.

"It seems Lina-kun herself cannot decide which of us to choose as her teacher!"

"In that case! It seems we have no choice but to decide for ourselves!"

Uaaaaah! They’re making selfish decisions again!

"I already said I don't want either of you!"

"Then it’s settled! We shall have our students fight, and the winner shall become Lina-kun's teacher!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! How wonderful. Just what I wanted!"

"I didn't want any of this!"

Ignoring my protests, the two continued their discussion. ...Well... since ancient times, it’s a classic trope that the "teacher" type never listens to what the student has to say...

"Very well! Then the time shall be two days from now at noon! We shall bring three students each and hold a duel!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Fine by me! ...Oh, but about the time—immediately after lunch is a bit... Strenuous exercise right after eating isn't good for digestion, and the brain doesn't work as well for a while after a meal. How about the evening?"

"Hmm... but even for a duel, I wonder if letting students wander about after evening is proper for their moral fiber..."

"...That is true..."

Uhm... For people who self-destruct or turn students into puppets without a second thought, they are strangely "teacher-like" in the weirdest places...

I gave up on protesting and simply watched with detached fascination.

"Then Lina-kun shall be the witness!"

"...Eh? I have to participate in this moronic event too?"

"Of course. It’s a duel for your sake, after all."

"I didn't ask for this!"

"At any rate, Kasha..."

"Hey, old man! Listen to me!"

"The match is two days from now in the afternoon! At the usual place! Got it!?"

"Just as I hoped!"

"I SAID, YOU PEOPLE—!!"

—And thus—

With my opinion completely ignored, a duel between Goras and Kasha was arranged to fight over the right to educate me.

"—So—?"

Time passed, and two days later, I spoke in a cold tone at the site of the forced duel.

"...What... is this...?"

"What... do you mean...?"

"It’s obviously a dueling ground."

Goras and Kasha answered as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"...No... what I want to know is... *why* is it a place like this...?"

"Why? It's standard, isn't it, Lina-kun?"

"Yes. It’s just your average, everyday Lava Stage."

"I SAID—!!"

I screamed at the two of them.

Yes. Right now, the three of us were standing on a stone bridge over a pool of lava, located deep down a cave halfway up a mountain. The "students" hadn't shown up yet, and—naturally—it was deathly hot.

It was so hot that sweat didn't even run. It’s not that I wasn't sweating; it’s that it evaporated from the heat before it could trickle down.

"What I’m trying to say is! Why do we have to fight on a 'Lava Stage' stage! It makes no sense! No sense at all!"

"What are you saying, Lina-san? When you say 'duel,' it’s naturally decided that it must be on a stage like this."

"That's right, Lina-kun. By the way, the next is the Sky Stage, and the last is the Underwater Stage."

"...I... see..."

Faced with two people who spoke with such absolute certainty, I abandoned all protest. For now, it seemed wiser to just get this duel over with and move on rather than continue a futile argument.

"...F... Fine then, just get on with it..."

The two nodded at my urging.

"Come forth! Roddy-kun!"

"Come! Student 011!"

At the calls from Goras and Kasha, a figure appeared from each side of the bridge and approached.

Roddy-kun, on Goras's side, was a man of average build in his late teens, wearing a black robe and possessing no particularly distinguishing features.

In contrast, Student 011, called by Kasha by his ID number, wore the same black robe and looked to be about the same age, but his appearance was terrifying.

He was large with a menacing gaze. He had no eyebrows, a skull tattoo on his left cheek, and numerous scars all over his face. And most terrifying of all was that, with such a face, his black hair was perfectly parted in a 7/3 style.

I suppose he was a delinquent who was making steady progress on the path of evil until Kasha's "education" corrected his personality (?), but his appearance hadn't caught up to the reform. On his forehead, an embedded control crystal glowed dimly.

The two stood a few paces apart, facing each other in silence. Goras nodded.

"We shall now hold the duel for Lina-kun's education rights!"

"The first event is...!"

Kasha pulled a scroll from her robes and unfurled it with a snap.

"A written exam on the basic theory of sorcery!"

Dudooooo-nn!

I involuntarily self-destructed.

"My, my. What's the matter, Lina-san? Suddenly self-destructing like that."

"He's right, Lina-kun. It's dangerous to do that in a place like this."

"...Y... Y... You people—!!"

I forced myself up.

"WHYYY is there a Lava Stage for a simple written exam!? It's pointless! Pointless!"

"I told you, didn't I, Lina-kun? Duels mean Lava Stages. In this world, even if things don't make much sense, there is such a thing as 'style'—things that are simply decided to be done a certain way."

"There is no 'style' that says duels must be on a Lava Stage!"

"But Lina-kun..."

"You just don't understand, Goras!" Kasha cut him off coldly.

"What!?"

"There simply wasn't such a custom in the region where Lina-san lived—that's all there is to it."

"...No... it's not a regional thing..."

"It's like how student grades are evaluated on a five-point scale in some places and a ten-point scale in others."

"I see! Is that it!?"

"NO IT ISN'T!!"

Goras and I shouted at the exact same time. But of course, neither Goras nor Kasha was listening to my protest.

Goras turned toward me.

"Listen, Lina-kun. I understand you're surprised by the unfamiliar Lava Stage. But you have to get used to things like this, or you won't survive in this world."

What kind of world is *that*?

"Now! Since Lina-kun is satisfied!"

Goras unilaterally decided I was satisfied and turned back to the students.

"Written exam... START!"

—And thus—

The written exam on basic theory between the two students began!

(It's not very exciting, so I'll skip the details.)

"...And...?"

"What is the third exam...?"

I asked in a dejected, throwing-it-away voice, having reached a state of total resignation. It was about four days after the first exam had ended. We were in a plaza slightly removed from a certain town.

Naturally, it wasn't the "Underwater Stage" that had been planned.

By the way, the second stage wasn't the rumored Sky Stage either; it was a written exam on

applied sorcery theory held in a rented room at the local Mages' Association.

According to Goras, he had accidentally forgotten to reserve the stage, so they couldn't secure a location. Apparently, the Sky Stage is very popular and is fully booked months in advance.

...Seriously... what kind of people use those places...?

Maybe the world is... actually much deeper than I thought...

There's an argument that if a regular place works as a substitute, they should have just used one from the start, but since they wouldn't listen even if I said so, I kept my mouth shut.

As for the scores so far: Kasha's side won the first round (Basic Theory) because her student had knowledge pre-programmed into the crystal, and Kasha's side lost the second round (Applied Theory) because of a lack of adaptability. It's currently one-to-one.

In other words:

The winner of this third match will be the one who wins the right to educate me!

.....

I HATE THIIIIIS!

"The content of the third match is practical application!"

Unaware of my internal conflict, Goras made a grand declaration.

What!? Practical application!?

"Both students shall actually fight to determine who can manipulate magical power more freely!"

"I see!"

This was my only chance! I clenched my fists and nodded deeply.

"Which means it's finally my turn, right!?"

.....

"...Beg pardon?"

Goras and Kasha knit their brows, not understanding what I meant.

"In short! A three-way battle between the two students and me! The winner gets my education rights! If I win, both of you go back to your town, and the person who educates me—the person who makes me grow—will be me, myself!"

"Hah-hah-hah. What are you saying, Lina-kun? That's reckless..."

"Reckless or not! Sometimes a student must grow through their own strength—that is youth! A

teacher quietly watching over them—that is love!"

"...! I feel like something is fundamentally wrong here, but as a teacher, I am strangely weak to words like 'youth' and 'love'!"

"What kind of irrational thing are you saying, Goras! Listen, Lina-san, you are a party to this. Besides, you've just been watching during the last two duels..."

"It's because I was in the special position of being the subject! It's perfectly rational for someone in a special position to have a seed rank! Besides, true education is recognizing and encouraging a student's autonomy!"

"Kuh...! I feel like this logic doesn't hold up at all, but when you say 'rational' and 'true education'...!"

Secret Technique: The "String Together Words They're Weak Against and Force Your Nonsense Through" Attack!

"And! At the very least, if you can't raise a student who surpasses me, it's impossible for you to help me grow any further! I can only know if you two have that ability by fighting the students directly!"

"...M... muu..."

"...Now that you mention it, that makes sense..."

Goras and Kasha were convinced—or rather, they felt convinced.

YESSSSS!

"Heh. Then it's settled. Shall we begin? The final battle!"

At my grand declaration, Goras gave a small groan.

"Muuu... it can't be helped. Come! My student, Richard Meyer-kun!"

Rustle...

At Goras's voice, the bushes at the edge of the plaza shook, and a black figure emerged. He was a mage in his early twenties wearing a black mantle and robe. While not massive, he had a fairly muscular build, tanned skin, and white teeth—the very image of someone who would be Goras's student.

"This is the crucial moment! I'm counting on you, Richard-kun!"

"Leave it to me, Goras-sensei!"

Richard replied with a voice as vibrant and energetic as his appearance.

"To repay even a little of the debt I owe you, I will surely seize victory!"

"Richard-kun!"

"SENSEEEEEI!"

Shouting in heated tones, Goras and Richard hugged each other tightly.

...Well, whatever...

I ignored them and turned toward Kasha.

"...And? Where’s your student?"

At my urging, she gave a fearless smile.

"Heh. Naturally, she is already waiting nearby. Prepare to be amazed! Come! My cute Student 075!"

At Kasha's call, the bushes on the opposite side of the plaza rustled—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The idiotic laughter that erupted along with the appearing figure was all too familiar.

"Wh...!?"

"Wh...!"

My voice and Goras’s joined in a chorus of shock.

"Naga!?"

—Yes—

The one who appeared in response to Kasha's call was Naga the White Serpent, with a crystal stuck to her forehead!

Come to think of it, she had disappeared at some point and I hadn't given it a second thought... To think she was being controlled by Kasha and would appear in a situation like this...

"Kasha! You! What have you done to Naga-kun!?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! What are you talking about, Goras? You have no right to protest! She’s the one who came to me and said, 'Please make me your student'!"

"Liar!"

"Where’s your proof? You don't have any, do you?"

Kasha spoke shamelessly to the snapping Goras.

Of course, there was no way Naga would volunteer to be Kasha’s student. She probably lured Naga with food or something and forced the "student" status on her when she saw an opening.

...Uhm... but this is... a bit bad.

Naturally, I don't care whether Naga is being controlled or what, but having her as an enemy in this situation is going to be quite a pain. Basically, Naga has magical power but no common sense. Since she's a creature that just lives for the mood and the moment, I can usually handle her with minor tricks or smooth talking...

But if she’s being controlled by Kasha, the story changes. Great magical power accompanied by sound judgment—plus the life force to revive no matter what attack spell she's blown away by. She’s not an opponent to be taken lightly.

"At any rate, let's begin the final round. Or will you surrender without fighting?"

"...Kuh...! Fine! The match begins!"

Faced with Kasha’s provocative words, Goras nodded while his fists trembled with rage. I nodded silently and took a step forward.

The three of us—Naga, Richard, and I—faced off.

"Then... let the final round... BEGIN!"

At Kasha’s signal, the final battle started!

"Ice Arrow!"

The ice arrows Naga fired rained down toward me! But that was an attack pattern I had already predicted!

"Windy Shield!"

Bugou!

The gale that would normally blow from the caster toward the opponent was modified slightly and released as a crosswind. The crosswind easily scattered the arrows of cold—

"Nguah!?"

—And incidentally blew over Richard-kun, who was chanting some spell nearby. As he tumbled, the scattered ice arrows rained down on him—

"Ah! Richard-kun!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You were all talk, weren't you, Goras! Your student is already frozen! Now! Only Lina-san remains! Do it! Student 075!"

"Heh! You don't have to tell me!"

Naga began chanting a spell.

I won't let you!

"Windy Shield!"

Bou-n!

This time, I released the strong wind from behind me, pointing forward! Simultaneously, I kicked off the ground and rode the wind, closing the distance to Naga in an instant!

"INVERSE TORNADO STRIKE!!"

As I charged in a flying kick pose, riding the wind, Naga gave a fearless smile.

"TWIST CROSS-COUNTER!!"

She thrust out her right fist and kicked off the ground toward me—

"HIAAAAAAAAAAH!?"

She was caught in the wind and sent flying backward!

Gosh! Are you an idiot!? If you jump in this situation, it’s obvious you'll be blown away by the wind!

In the end, my flying kick didn't reach because Naga was blown back. Soon the wind died down, and the two of us stood on the ground, facing off again.

...Wait a minute...

"This is it! Naga!"

"Heh! Just what I wanted! Lina!"

I put my right hand into my robes, pulled it out, and held it high toward the sky! Between my fingertips, a single gold coin shone brilliantly! The moment I let it roll to my feet—

"Tou!"

Naga dashed toward it at incredible speed to pick it up!

And onto Naga's head—

SPAN!

The slipper I pulled from my robes landed a clean hit as a counter.

"Hey! What was that for, Lina! That hurt!"

"...Naga... you..."

I stared with dead eyes at Naga, who was protesting while firmly clutching the gold coin.

"...You... you aren't actually being controlled, are you...?"

"...Eh...?"

The one who let out a stunned voice was Kasha, who was watching from behind.

Meanwhile, Naga didn't show a hint of agitation. She thrust her chest out grandly.

"Heh. You figured it out, did you?"

"...Well... if your behavior pattern hasn't changed that much, anyone would notice."

"EEEEEEEEH!?"

Naga turned back to Kasha, who had let out a cry of shock.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You certainly underestimated Naga the White Serpent!"

She lightly patted the back of her head with her left hand, and the crystal on her forehead fell off with a *pore*.

"No way!?"

Kasha was surprised by every little thing.

Heh. There's no point in logic when it comes to Naga's actions. No matter what absurd phenomenon occurs, the expert move is to just say, "Well, it's Naga..." and not worry about it.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Being so easily controlled by a thing like this is proof of an immature, unestablished ego! Did you think you could control Naga the White Serpent, a woman who lives by her firm convictions, with a single pebble like this!?"

"No! Then why did you pretend to be controlled...!?"

"Heh! Isn't it obvious!? It seemed somewhat interesting, and if I pretended to be controlled, you treated me to meals and things!"

At Naga's declaration, Kasha fell to her knees in despair.

And then, Goras's loud laughter echoed!

"Hah-hah-hah-hah! It seems your defeat is certain, Kasha-kun! Because as of now, Naga-kun can no longer be called your student!"

"...W... What...!"

Kasha snapped her head up.

"Naga-san! Just for the duration of this match, become my student! If we win, fifty gold coins!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Leave it to me, Kasha-sensei!"

Ugh. I knew it would turn out like this.

"That's cowardly, Kasha-kun!"

"Cowardly or not, a student is a student!"

Kasha easily dismissed Goras's protest.

"Now! Naga-san! Hurry up and take Lina-san—"

"Freeze Arrow!"

Koka-kiiii-n!

In that instant, the blow that suddenly flew in from the side and froze Naga was fired by Richard, who everyone had long since forgotten!

"No way!?"

Kasha’s voice of shock... and...

"Ooh!"

Goras's voice of joy overlapped!

"Richard-kun! You managed to escape from that ice!"

"Of course!"

Richard replied to the joyous Goras with a heated tone and gaze.

"I couldn't afford to be discouraged when it came to repaying my great mentor! With the heat of the bond burning in our hearts, melting that ice was a simple task!"

"Richard-kun!"

"Sensei!"

Tears of emotion streaming down their faces, the two ran to each other and hugged tightly.

"AAAAAH! SO ANNOYING!!"

Dudooooo-m!

The attack spell I fired blew Richard and Goras away together.

And so—

The battle ended with my victory.

Realizing their own immaturity, Goras and Kasha surprisingly went back quietly to the Kurandall City Mages' Association. Old man Goras still seemed a bit interested in Naga, but it appeared he chose his position as an educator over his romantic feelings.

...Personally, I think it would have saved me a lot of trouble if he had just taken Naga with him.

But at any rate, with this, the incident—

Hadn't actually ended.

Bam!

The door to the restaurant at lunchtime swung open with a loud noise.

I let out a sigh.

Two men of average build entered the shop. Scanning the interior, their eyes landed on me.

"Oh! We found you! Lina Inverse-kun!"

One of them said as they bustled over.

"It seems that low-level teachers like Goras and Kasha were simply inadequate as your tutors! It’s clear that I, Wyatt Selinos—known as the 'Thunderclap Vice-Principal'—am the one truly fit to be your teacher!"

"No, no. I, Drake Lyfarm—known as the 'Eternal Darkness Cricket Club Advisor'—am the one..."

"SHUT UUUUUUUUP!!"

Dudogooo-n!

And so—

My days of blowing away a constant stream of teacher candidates continued for a while...

Seriously, somebody do something about this.

(Looking On The Bright Side Is Depressing: THE END)

The PB Battle! (Part 1)

"The blue sky!"

I said, looking up at the heavens. My heart was overflowing with emotion.

"The white clouds!"

Ah! My eyes are welling up with tears so much I can barely see the clouds!

"...Honestly... why are you getting so carried away all of a sudden, Lina...?"

Neither the grumpy tone of my traveling companion, Naga, nor the slightly cold stares of the people passing by bothered me right now.

Because—

I had finally arrived.

In the land of my dreams: the Duchy of Ilmard.

...I'm sure there isn't a person alive who doesn't know of it, but I'll explain just in case.

Here—the Duchy of Ilmard, part of the Coastal States Alliance—is a small country about the size of a local fiefdom. However, as a summer resort and tourist destination, it's a fairly wealthy nation, boasting many villas owned by rich folks from who-knows-where.

If you asked anyone to name a few famous tourist spots, this place would always come up. Its name had reached all the way to my hometown of Zephilia.

—No—let me be honest.

For me, having started this aimless journey, stopping here in Ilmard was one of my primary goals.

If I recall correctly, it was back when I was ten—

My big sister and my mom went on a sightseeing trip to Ilmard together—

While my dad and I were left behind, spending our days eating nothing but stir-fried vegetables and crying into our plates—

When I saw the two of them come back with dark suntans and big smiles—but *no souvenirs*—I seriously considered becoming a delinquent.

The only reason I grew up straight and honest without rebelling was entirely thanks to my sense of purpose: the vow that I would visit this country myself one day.

And that day is now! Now that I've achieved that goal, what crime is there in being a little excited!?

None! None at all!

Ignoring me as I trembled with emotion, Naga scratched her head with a look of exasperation.

"Really... I don't see what's so great about it... I've been to places like this so often I'm sick of them..."

Snap.

I froze for a second, turned back toward Naga with a beaming smile, and *grabbed her by the scruff of the neck!*

"Heh-heh-heh-heh. Since I'm *this* moved, you wouldn't dream of doing something like raining on my parade, would you, Naga?"

"O-Of course, Lina! I would never dream of such a thing! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

For some reason, Naga's face twitched as she nodded frantically.

"Alright! Then let's get to sightseeing—"

Dwashaaaa!

Something crashed down, ruining the mood.

Right in front of my path, a man came rolling out and collapsed.

.....

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?"

"If you've got a problem, come at us."

"All bark and no bite, huh?"

The man—a well-dressed older gentleman—was being surrounded by five or six thug-looking guys who had emerged from a side alley. One of the thugs glanced toward me.

"Hey. You're in the way, shrimp. Beat it."

.....

...Mood... Ruined.

Beside me, I felt Naga give a small shiver and quickly back away.

And then—

"Fireball!"

Doooooon!

The blast I unleashed dyed the street in crimson flames.

The thugs and the old guy all tumbled to the ground.

I don't know the circumstances, but anyone who rains on a maiden's high spirits deserves nothing but equal destruction.

"—Now then, with my mood refreshed... Shall we go, Naga?"

"—Please wait a moment."

The voice that called out to me was, of course, not Naga's.

I didn't know who it was, and I had no intention of dealing with them.

—That is, until I heard this sentence.

"Would you be interested in... guarding my private beach?"

.....

"...Private... beach...?"

—Slowly—

I turned around.

Standing there quietly was a woman with a white parasol.

She looked to be about twenty. She wore a white dress and had fair skin untouched by the sun. Her long, wavy black hair fluttered in the sea breeze.

"...M... My lady..."

The older man I had just blown away groaned—or rather, pulled himself up shakily.

She ignored him, gave me a small nod, and continued.

"Yes. For the ten days I am staying here. I would like you to guard my private beach. Of course, I will compensate you appropriately."

"...W... Well, for starters, why don't you tell us the details?"

"Wait, Lina, I thought we were sightseeing—"

Thump.

My backfist silenced Naga as she started to complain.

—The scenic summer of Ilmard. Ten days spent at a private beach—

My head was filled with that phrase.

—I can win! With this! Against my sister back home!

Even if the location is the same, she stayed at a normal beach for four or five days.

I, on the other hand, will be at a *private beach* for ten days!

It’s a total victory!

In that case, there's no way I can turn down such a sweet deal!

"Very well. Then let's talk at a nearby cafe terrace."

I followed her without hesitation as she began to walk.

"I apologize for the delay. My name is Lily MacLean."

"Ah, I’m Lina Inverse! And this is Naga."

"...You're strangely hyper this time, Lina..."

Naga muttered in a cold tone, clearly failing to understand the delicate heart of a maiden.

Beside Miss Lily, the older man who had been harassed by the thugs stood perfectly straight, holding her white parasol. He looked to be at an age where white hairs were starting to mix into his black hair, but his body was lean and fit.

Lily glanced at him.

"This is Sebastian. He manages the villa grounds while I’m away and serves as my butler during my stay."

"Sebastian?"

At the mention of the butler’s name, Naga—who hadn't shown much interest until then—furrowed her brows.

"Do you know him, Naga?"

"Heh. What are you saying, Lina? I was simply impressed by a name that screams 'I am a butler.' That is all."

"Oh! You understand!?"

At Naga's nonsensical remark, Lily gave a small clap of her hands.

"Actually, I chose him because of his name too! It’s surprisingly rare to find someone who appreciates that hobby..."

"Heh! Naturally! Such high-brow wit is beyond the understanding of average people! I commend your sense!"

"My, Naga-san. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

...Somehow... they’re hitting it off over something completely mysterious...

"...Um, excuse me... By the way, Miss Lily, about that... request...?"

"Oh, my. That’s right."

Lily clapped her hands again.

"Actually, there are people who occasionally come to my private beach to poach."

"...I see..."

"It’s an eyesore to have filthy people in ragtag boats entering my private beach, and it rots the sea—"

"....."

"—Not that that’s the only reason, but really, entering private property without permission is hardly commendable, wouldn't you agree?"

"...W... Well, true..."

I nodded frantically.

...I... I thought I heard a pretty harsh line just now... but it was probably my imagination. Probably.

"So, a few years ago, I had a discussion with the local guards... but the poaching didn't stop. Well, the guards are all incompetent fools anyway. Just tax-thieving parasites on the citizens who eat for free."

"....."

"—That’s what gossiping people say behind their backs, anyway. I'm grateful to them because they were all working very hard."

...I... I wonder... It didn't sound like she was very grateful to me...

"So, I came up with a plan. I asked a mage acquaintance of mine to make a little gadget."

"A gadget?"

"Yes. It’s a ball about the size of an armful, floating just below the surface. When it hits the

bottom of a boat, it explodes. Ho-ho-ho-ho."

...Ho-ho-ho... lady, you...

"I set those out last year. It was delightful to see the fragments of small boats washing up on the shore. I thought that would put an end to the poaching."

...If the poaching stopped because of *that*... those poachers are dead...

"However, this time, those poachers have started a petty grudge and begun harrassing me. Somehow, they throw trash onto the beach, or hire thugs in town like the ones you saw earlier to harass us..."

"—Wai... Wait a minute!"

I interrupted her.

"...Which means... if I had caught those guys I just blew away with a spell and made them confess their connections, this would have been solved easily...?"

"...Oh. Now that you mention it, that might be true."

...Hey, now...

Well, it's also true that if the case were solved that easily, my plan to "play around at a private beach under the guise of solving a case" would be ruined...

"At any rate, lately I've even started to feel my life might be in danger... So, I would like you two to guard the beach for the ten days I am staying here. And if possible, I want you to punish the culprits. The reward... for one person, five gold coins per day, for a total of fifty each—"

"—Guh...!"

"Fifty coins!?"

"Of course, if you punish the culprits, I will add a bonus on top of that."

"I... I see!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga was also getting carried away beside me at the mention of such a sweet sum.

Desperately resisting the urge to nod unconditionally, I finally presented the condition I had been thinking of.

"I... I see. I understand the financial terms. By the way, I have a proposal regarding the guarding conditions..."

"Yes? What is it?"

"It might be better to call it a request for cooperation rather than a proposal... Even if we guard for ten days, if we can't catch the poachers, it'll just be a repeat of the same thing. I think it's better to catch the culprits once and for all..."

"I agree."

"With that in mind! Regarding those poachers who were hit by the mines before: if we wander around the beach looking like 'We're mages! We're on guard!', they'll likely be cautious and won't show themselves. In that case, we definitely won't be able to catch them!

So! If we pretend to be guests of yours, Lily-san, and act like we're just playing around, they'll let their guard down! In fact, they might even think, 'If we harm the guests, it'll do more damage,' and be more likely to move!

What do you think of this method!? That's what I'm thinking! Personally!"

"....."

Lily looked off into the distance for a moment, thinking about my proposal.

"—In short—you want to play on my private beach while you guard it?"

!? She read me!

Hiding my internal panic, I gave a beaming smile.

"...Well... you can take it however you like, but I believe it is the most rational method."

She smiled back.

"My, my. I wondered what you were going to say, and it's only that? Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho. If I let commoner drifters like you swim in it, my private beach will get dirty."

Snap!

"...Is what you thought I was going to say? Of course I don't mind, Lina-san."

"...Ha... hahaha, is that so?"

A vein almost popped on my forehead for a second, but I guess it was a misunderstanding...

"...Hey... Lina..."

As I let out a slightly dry laugh, Naga whispered to me.

"...Ever since a moment ago, I feel like Lily's words... have a bit of a sting to them..."

"...W... What are you saying, Naga!" I whispered back.

"Fifty gold coins for guarding while playing on a private beach! There's no other sucker—I mean, nice person like her!"

"...Well... true, the terms aren't bad..."

"Then it's settled!"

I turned back toward Lily.

"Understood! I'll gladly accept this request!"

"My, thank you."

Lily gave a small clap of her hands.

"Then, it's a bit sudden, but would you like to come to my beach?"

"Absolutely!"

I nodded immediately.

And so, we all started walking toward the private beach of my dreams!

Zazaaaaan... Zabuuuun...

—The sound of waves echoed endlessly.

Standing on the white sand, I stared at the view.

"...Sea urchins... aren't they...?"

"Yes. They are sea urchins."

Lily answered quietly to my stunned murmur.

—Blue sky—a cove surrounded by greenery—a white stone villa—a beach sparkling in the summer sun—

And wall-to-wall black sea urchins—

"...Uuuuuuh..."

"They were like this when I woke up this morning."

Whether she was talking to the dazed me or not, she continued her explanation in a flat tone.

"I thought I had no choice but to hire people to deal with them, so I took Sebastian and went into town."

"...Uuuuuuuuuuuh..."

The beach was packed with black sea urchins. Spiny black sea urchins.

Naturally, you couldn't even step into the water like this.

What happened to me, who bought a swimsuit on the way, changed at the villa, and dashed

all the way here...?

"And then in town, Sebastian was harassed... and that’s when I met you. By the way, Lina-san, are you listening?"

"...Uuuuuuuuuuuuuh..."

.....

—Hah! No!

Dazing out here won't make the urchins go away! I need to calm down—

"I don't really get it, but it’s fine. After all, freshness is the life of a sea urchin."

...I’m still a bit confused.

First, a big deep breath.

Now, for a calm situational analysis.

A swarm of sea urchins washed up all along the water's edge—

Naturally, this didn't happen on its own. It’s no doubt the harassment of those poachers.

...If they can gather this many urchins, I feel like they should sell them instead of using them for harassment.

"—Anyway, the culprit is a total idiot."

"...I don't care about that, Lina... aren't you *really* getting carried away this time?"

Naga chimed in with an exasperated look at my slightly off-target comment.

That said, Naga had also changed into her swimsuit.

By the way, my swimsuit was an orange two-piece. Naga’s was a black one-piece type.

...Is it just me, or does she show *less* skin in a swimsuit than usual...?

"See? It’s quite malicious, isn't it?"

To Lily, who was the only one still in her dress, I nodded firmly.

"...Honestly! Doing something like this to *my* private beach! I won't let them get away with this!"

I wondered if anyone would call me out on that slip of the tongue, but Lily just smiled.

"And so, naturally, you'll be handling the removal of these sea urchins, won't you? Since you're my 'friends' and all."

.....

"—Eh!?"

By the time Naga and I turned around with a delayed reaction, she had already turned her dress hem and was walking back toward the villa.

"...C-Cursed poachers! I'll never forgive them! I'll find them and destroy them!"

It was dinner time when Naga and I finished our work and returned to the villa.

"My. You're early. Is the removal finished?"

"Yeah. There might be one or two left, but otherwise, it's all clean."

I answered grumpily to the Lily who greeted us.

...In the end, this woman didn't even come to help...

Honestly, I wanted to complain, but considering the reward and the "ten days at a private beach," I had to hold it in.

Besides, Naga and I didn't actually do anything as honest as moving all those urchins by hand. If we had, we wouldn't have finished by sunset—it's doubtful we would have finished by tomorrow morning.

Naga and I used the sand from the beach and rocks from the shore to create dozens of small golems and ordered them to "Pick up the urchins along the coast and throw them out to sea."

Of course, after the work was done, the golems were released from the earth spirits' influence and returned to being sand and rocks.

...Our initial plan was to let the golems handle the work while we went swimming...

But once we started, it was impossible to swim.

After all, nearly a hundred golems were chucking sea urchins into the air at high speed. If you tried to stick your head out of the water, you'd get hit by at least one or two.

Even I didn't want to swim in that situation.

So in the end, we just stood on the shore and watched the golems work until now.

Thanks to that, I got a tan, but I'm not exactly happy about it.

"I think the poachers will come to check things out tonight..."

I said while sipping the ice pumpkin soup served to us after Lily guided us to the dining table.

"By the way, do you have any idea what time they usually show up?"

"No, lack of sleep is the enemy of beautiful skin, so I sleep soundly at night. So I wouldn't know...

—Oh, Sebastian, do you have any idea?"

She asked the butler standing dutifully beside her.

"Well... I am occasionally awake until late, but that is for my duties... I do not spend my time simply staring out at the sea... I apologize, but I have no leads..."

"Hmm... Then what about the cook, or the servants...?"

"As a butler, I cannot leave this place, but the others are all hired locally, so they return to town after the dinner cleanup. They likely have no leads either."

The butler answered while standing at attention.

"...Hmm... I see..."

Which means that at night, this villa only has four people in it, including Naga and me...

"Well then, Lina-san, Naga-san. I'll leave the beach watch to you tonight. I shall be sleeping soundly.

...Though, I did take quite a long nap today... I wonder if I'll be able to sleep?"

"Hah-hah-hah-hah. I hope you sleep well."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho. While we're pulling an all-nighter for the watch."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho. This is the fate of hired guards who are no better than dogs. If it upsets you, you have no choice but to be the one who uses others rather than being used—"

"....."

"....."

"—Is what some guards who disparage their own position might say, but I believe yours is a noble profession. I'm sure it's hard, but I'm counting on you."

"...Y... Yes..."

"F... Heh... leave it to us..."

Naga and I both nodded frantically while wearing strained smiles.

Zazaaaaaaan...

The waves, breaking in the moonlight, pushed and pulled against the nighttime shore. Countless stars sparkled in the sky. Even in this season, a fairly cool breeze blew over the beach at night.

"...Hey... Lina..."

Sitting side-by-side on the sand and staring at the distant starry sky, Naga spoke softly.

"...That Lily woman says some really infuriating things sometimes, doesn't she?"

"Don't. Don't mention it." I answered, shaking my head.

"But no matter how you look at it, she’s not being thoughtless—she’s doing it on purpose."

"But Naga! The request fee is huge!"

"...That's true, but..."

"It’s Ilmard! It’s a private beach! Doesn't just thinking about that make you feel... satisfied? Like your heart is full!?"

At my words, she gave a small shrug.

"Heh. If your heart is filled with that little emotion, then mine is only half-gi—"

The latter half of her sentence was muffled as her face was buried in the sand.

Naturally, I had suddenly stepped on the back of her head.

She scrambled up—

"—Shh! They're here!"

Before Naga could complain, my words stopped her movement.

—Across the dark expanse of the water—

If you looked closely at the moonlit waves, there was the shadow of a small boat.

We were stationed in a spot that was hard to see from the shore. We were far enough away that a normal speaking voice wouldn't carry, so I didn't think we'd been spotted yet—

"...But that’s a very small boat."

"The number of people... I can't see well at this distance... But based on the size, at most five or six..."

I nodded at Naga's whisper and replied in kind.

"...But Lina, how did they manage to fill this whole place with urchins in a single night with that boat and that many people?"

"...Now that you mention it..."

With that many people, even if they spent all day diving, they couldn't possibly gather the amount that filled the beach during the day.

I’m not kidding—the amount earlier was like the entire daily catch of a small fishing port. There was no way a few people could gather that much in a single night in a dark sea.

Before that, if you loaded that many urchins onto such a small boat, it would sink instantly—or rather, they wouldn't fit in the first place.

So how did they pull it off?

.....

"Well, if we don't know, we'll just beat them up and ask them directly."

"True."

Ending the discussion there, we held our breath and waited for the boat.

Soon, the small boat slowly approached the coastline, and the figures on board became fairly clear. We couldn't see fine details yet, but there were three people.

Whether this was all the poachers or not, we could just ask after beating them up.

The boat got closer. The creak of oars could be heard, and we could see the three on board were men.

After drawing them in close enough—

"Let's go! Naga! Let's stop them in their tracks!"

"Heh. Got it."

Both of us began chanting the same spell.

Soon the spells were complete. We looked at each other, nodded, and dashed out toward the shore.

"—Someone's there!" one of the men shouted.

Another grabbed the oars in a panic—but too late! You can't escape now!

"Freeze Arrow!"

The lumps of cold Naga and I fired shot toward the small boat!

But at that instant!

One of the men on the boat threw an oar! It collided with our spells and—

Giga!

At that point, the cold of the Freeze Arrows was released! The cold didn't reach the boat!

What!?

Ordinary people shouldn't know that Fireballs or Freeze Arrows can be intercepted like that.

Was it a coincidence, or—?

"Heh! Too soft! Poachers!"

Looking at the sea surface at Naga’s shout, I saw that while our spells hadn't hit directly, they had frozen the surrounding water, trapping the boat.

Lucky!

"You can't run now, Mr. Poachers! Give up and surrender quietly!"

"Don't make me laugh!"

Even in this situation, one of the men on the boat barked out confidently—

And at the same time, the boat and the ice it was stuck in began to rise slowly!

What!?

Soon, with a massive splash, a black *something* emerged, lifting the boat and the ice!

"—A crab!?" Naga shouted.

The silhouette did indeed look like a crab.

But the form was a bit distorted, and I didn't think a crab that huge would be hanging around the coast.

Which meant—

"It’s a golem! There’s a mage among them!"

That explained why the Freeze Arrow was intercepted by a thrown oar.

Thinking about it, it was obvious.

If the thugs who attacked the butler earlier were hired by the poachers, then the information that *we*—mages—had intervened must have gotten back to them.

It wasn't surprising that they would hire a mage of their own.

"You're the ones who should give up!" the man's voice rang out again.

"We'll see about that!" I shouted back.

A battle of words. The two of us versus the poachers.

The gazes we exchanged threw sparks across the nighttime beach!

(The PB Battle: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

At last, a minor enemy appears before Lina and the gang!

The outcome of the battle seems obvious, but will Lina actually be able to enjoy her ten days at the private beach!?

Will Naga finally get a chance to shine!?

And doesn't writing this make the author—who can't swim—feel incredibly sad!?

Leaving you with these various questions... wait for it! Next time: "**The PB Battle! (Part 2)**"!

The PB Battle! (Part 2)

Synopsis

Ten days at a summer private beach in the tourist hotspot of Ilmard.

Lured by such sweet words, Lina accepted a job to protect the private beach of Lily—a noble daughter whose words are packed with thorns—from a group of poachers.

First came the harassment: a beach completely carpeted in sea urchins. And just as Lina and Naga finally finished clearing them away, the poachers appeared before them alongside a giant crab golem!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You certainly make me laugh, poachers!"

Naga's laughter echoed across the nighttime beach. She pointed a sharp finger at the poachers perched atop the crab golem.

"Do you really think the White Serpent Naga would flinch at such a bluff of a crab golem!?"

"A bluff of a crab golem, you say!? Hah! Foolish!"

One of the poachers, presumably a mage, returned Naga's sneer with his own.

"I take it you are drifter mages hired by that woman... If this looks like a mere crab golem to you, then that is the extent of your skill! Listen and be amazed! Through my years of research, this golem—despite being crab-shaped—can actually move forward and backward!"

"All those years of research for *that*?"

"Hey, you over there! Don't dismiss a man's life work in a single sentence!"

The mage snapped at my retort.

...I mean... even if you say that...

If you've got years to research how to make a crab golem walk forward, I feel like your time would be 160 times more productive if you spent it growing onions... Honestly...

"Fine! There's no point talking to a brat who doesn't understand anything! You'll learn the true terror of this thing once we start fighting! I won't show any mercy!"

With those words, the crab golem began advancing toward the shore.

"That's my line!"

I began chanting a spell.

—And then—

"Ice Arrow!"

The opening shot was a blast fired by Naga!

Her target: the poachers atop the golem!

Certainly, if you take down the caster, the golem becomes nothing but a useless hunk of junk.

However...

"Protect me!"

Zazabaaa!

At the mage’s command, the water split as the crab golem’s massive claw emerged. Using the claw as a shield for the poachers, he easily blocked Naga’s Ice Arrow.

But I had expected as much. I released the spell I had been chanting.

"Vibration Blast!"

Gogaaa!

The hit landed right on the joint of the claw’s arm!

Zobaaaaan!

Unable to withstand the destructive force and its own weight, the snapped claw kicked up a spray of water and sank to the bottom of the sea.

The men on board fell into a panic.

"Hey! It broke!"

"Don't falter! Golem! Submerge and head for the coast! Upon landing, execute Order Number One!"

At the mage’s command, the crab golem dove back into the sea.

Only the poachers’ small boat, surrounded by ice, remained on the surface.

I see! Their plan is to let the golem run wild on the shore and wreck the private beach!

In that case, I’ll just have to crush it the moment it lands!

But first, I need to take down the mages!

I began chanting under my breath—

But before I could finish...

"Fireball!"

The mage released a spell! The target of the glowing sphere was... the water!?

Gobaaa!

The fireball struck the surface, creating a massive cloud of steam along with the explosion. And then—a huge wave caused by the impact.

"—What!?"

Zabashaaa!

A spray of water washed over Naga and me as we cried out.

It wasn't quite a tsunami, but it was a wave large enough to wash the poachers' small boat out to sea. Added to that, the resulting steam blocked our vision; the boat was no longer visible.

I wanted to pursue them with a Levitation spell, but intercepting the crab golem came first!

I began chanting again—

—Zozazazazo-zazazaaa!

Soon enough, the crab golem broke the surface and appeared on the shore!

Alright! I'll take it down in one hit!

"Flare..."

But before I could finish the spell...

Dogaaa!

The crab golem's body exploded and scattered!

...Zazaaa... Zapaaa...

"—So, they are crabs."

Shortly after dawn.

Lily came down from the villa to the beach with a beaming smile and asked the question. I wore a deceptive grin.

"...Well... that's how it is. Crabs."

I replied, scratching my head.

Behind me, the beach was covered in a swarm of crabs.

—At that moment—

A split second before I could attack, countless crabs had come flying out from the self-destructing body of the crab golem.

It seemed that mage had built a hollow golem and packed it full of crabs he had gathered. The golem was designed to self-destruct upon landing, scattering the crabs everywhere.

Most likely, yesterday's sea urchins were spread using the same method.

"And how soon can you have them removed?"

Lily asked, still smiling. Her eyes and mouth were laughing, but I could easily imagine she was furious inside.

By the way, Naga and I had already used the fragments of the crab golem to create mini-golems, just like yesterday, and were in the middle of the cleanup.

"...Well... at this pace, I think we'll be done by noon... Ahahahaha..."

"Oh, I see. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho. Please do your best. I wouldn't dream of thinking that even incompetent people who were easily outwitted by mere poachers despite their big talk should at least handle a crab cleanup since I'm paying a reward... but if the work isn't finished soon, neither of us can play on the beach, can we?"

".....

I... I suppose so...

...By... By the way, Lily-san, do you happen to know where the nearest fish market is?"

"...A fish market...?"

"Yeah. While the golems are clearing the crabs, I thought I'd go do a little questioning."

The morning market was filled with noise and the scent of the sea.

"...So? Lina, what are we doing here...?"

Naga muttered grumpily as she looked around at the seafood lined up.

"...Well, you'll find out soon enough."

Ignoring Naga's constant grumbling, I did a quick sweep of the market.

For the record, neither Naga nor I were in our usual mage attire; we were wearing perfectly ordinary clothes.

"Hey, hey. Mister."

After I finished looking around, I called out to a shopkeeper nearby.

"I just did a quick loop around the place... but I didn't see a single sardine. Why is that?"

"—!"

Naga finally realized what I was getting at and looked up.

Yes.

A massive amount of crabs and sea urchins, enough to fill a small beach. That wasn't something a few people could just source on their own. The culprits must have procured them from a place like this. That's what I came here to investigate.

"Ah, those. As soon as the morning market started, they were all bought up. ...I don't know what anyone would do with that many, buying them all out like that..."

The man replied to my question.

"...Now that you mention it, I think yesterday and the day before, crabs or something else were sold out too...?"

"Yeah. Yesterday was crabs... and the day before was sea urchins. I wonder what they're doing with 'em."

The answer to my half-bluff question was exactly what I expected.

Bingo!

The culprits are buying up the seafood for their harassment right around here! That means all we have to do is find the person who bought them, and we've found our culprit!

I put on a troubled expression.

"...Hmm... I was asked by someone to get some sardines... is there any way you can help? Mister."

"...Even if you ask, there's nothing I can do since they're gone."

"Then, could you tell me who bought all the sardines? If I explain my situation, maybe they'll let me have a few."

"Sure. I don't mind."

The shopkeeper, unaware of the situation, nodded easily at my request.

Zapapaaaan. Zabuuuun.

The sound of breaking waves. The cry of seagulls. The small harbor was filled with the scents and sounds of the sea.

"—Isn't that it, Lina?"

Naga pointed toward the entrance of a cave at the end of a jutting cape.

"...Looks like it. There’s nothing else like it nearby..."

I nodded firmly.

After hearing the name of the man who bought the fish from the market guy, I went to his house, but no one was home. After asking around, I heard a story about how he and several companions were loading the sardines onto a boat and making several trips back and forth between a cave and the harbor.

That made it almost certain that the cave was the poachers’ hideout.

"Heh. In that case, this will be quick. Come on, Lina! Blow away the whole cape along with the poachers with a Dragon Slave or something!"

"Right! ...Wait, no! We don't know how many poachers there are in total! They might not all be in the cave right now! For now, we should handle this peacefully—catch them alive and make them confess their organization!"

"...That sounds a bit tedious..."

"True, but if a poacher we didn't finish off here starts harassing us again, it’ll just be the same thing all over again. *That* would be way more annoying."

"...Heh... fine then... so how do we get there?"

"...Hmm..."

I looked at the cape again. At least from here, there didn't seem to be a path leading to the cave. There might be a small trail somewhere, but searching for it would be a pain.

In that case, naturally—

"First, from the sky. It’ll be bad if they spot us while we’re flying... so we’ll loop around over the cave along the cape, and then go inside."

"Heh. Got it."

"Then, let's go..."

"Levitation!"

Naga and I spoke in unison, and our bodies floated gently into the air.

The stifling smell of the tide lingered in the chilly air.

The half-submerged cave curved sharply to the right, with darkness pooling in its depths. There was no one in sight, but a wooden walkway built at the edge of the cave and two small

boats tied to it proved that this place wasn't uninhabited.

Naga and I looked at each other, nodded silently, landed on the walkway, and began heading deeper into the cave.

Eventually, we saw the faint glow of magical light further in.

In the light blurred by the darkness, there were three shadows moving right next to a large rock.

—There they are!

Alright! I'll just hit them with a Sleep spell—

Just as I was thinking that...

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! We've finally found you! Poachers!"

Naga's voice rang out through the cave, completely ignoring my plan!

"What!?"

"That voice from yesterday!?"

"We've been found!?"

The poachers' voices rose up. Among them was definitely the one I heard last night.

"Tch! No choice! Escape! Everyone, get on this!"

The mage's voice echoed in the dark, and the three shadows leaped onto the rock.

—The rock!? No way!

Just as a possibility flashed through my mind...

"Go! Forward!"

Along with the mage's voice, the rock began to move!

"What...!?"

Naga and I cried out in shock as the rock surged past us, carrying the poachers on its back and kicking up a spray of water.

"Follow them, Naga! That's probably a sardine-shaped golem!"

"Heh! Got it!"

We both chanted a spell simultaneously—

"Raywing!"

Naga and I soared into the air, chasing after the golem!

Noticing us in pursuit, the mage atop the golem fired a spell our way!

An Ice Arrow!? But it’s useless!

The flurry of cold arrows was easily deflected by the wind barriers Naga and I were wearing. It seemed even that mage didn't know the properties of Raywing.

The golem and we followed it out of the cave. The swimming speed of the golem and our flight speed were almost identical. The chase across the sea continued at a fixed distance.

As long as the mages were on top of it, there was no fear of them diving and losing us, but it was pointless if we couldn't close the gap. I wished I could stop the golem, but I couldn't use any significant spells while flying with this technique.

At the beginning of the chase, the mage on the golem had fired some attack spells, but having realized it was futile, he had stopped trying.

Before long, the situation hit a stalemate; we and the golem continued the pursuit like a routine, drawing a large circle on the sea.

—Argh! This is endless!

Should I just jump over to Naga and blast the golem with a Dragon Slave!?

Just as I was starting to lose my patience...

Suddenly—

The golem’s speed dropped sharply!

What happened!?

Apparently, the guys on the golem didn't understand the situation either, as they were panicking—

Regardless, now was our chance!

The distance between us and the golem closed in an instant!

The mage frantically fired Ice Arrows at us, but of course they didn't work and were easily deflected.

Naga and I charged straight ahead and—

BAM!

We slammed into the guys on the golem!

Two of them fell into the sea with a splash; in their place, Naga and I canceled our spells and landed on the golem’s back.

"...Urgh...!"

The remaining one—the mage—groaned and glared at us.

By the way, the reason I didn't knock him off was simple: if I knocked him into the sea, he might order the golem to dive. If that happened, we'd lose our footing.

Besides, I figured we had the advantage in close-quarters combat.

...Well... I doubt Naga had thought that far ahead...

At any rate, this was the first time I'd seen him face-to-face in the daylight; he was an ordinary-looking middle-aged man in his thirties. His clothes were very common, the kind you wouldn't notice even if you passed him in town.

"Heh. Surrender, poacher!"

"So. Why don't you confess? The names of all the poachers—and the name of the mastermind."

"Mastermind!?"

Naga and the mage cried out at the same time. Naga's was a cry of surprise; the mage's was a cry of agitation.

"Wait, Lina, a mastermind...!?"

"W... What are you talking about!? What!?"

"It's no use playing dumb. First sea urchins, then crabs. And today, sardines. How much did it cost to buy up all those amounts? You wouldn't spend that much money just to catch fish at someone's private beach. Obviously. Your expenses would outweigh your profits.

In that case—there must be someone who wants to harass Lily-san even if it means providing a significant amount of money. That's the logical conclusion, right? Now, cough it up. If you speak quietly, I'll let you off with just beating you up and taking your wallet before throwing you into the sea."

"...I... I'll ask... but what happens if I don't speak quietly...?"

"Do you really want to know?"

".....No, never mind..."

The mage spoke and drew a large knife from behind his waist.

"In any case, if I defeat you two here, it'll all be over! Just because it's two against one doesn't mean women...!"

"...Huh...?"

While he was talking, I easily kicked the knife out of his hand, leaving the mage to let out a

dumbfounded sound.

Man, he has slow reflexes...

"...Um..."

"In short, just because someone is a mage or a woman doesn't mean they're bad at close combat."

"Guh...!"

Having finally realized his overwhelming disadvantage, the mage took a slow step back and—

"Water Breathing!"

Zazun!

He chanted the spell for breathing underwater and leaped into the sea.

"Tch! Wait...!"

"No need to chase him, Lina!"

Naga stopped me as I was about to dive in after him.

"...Eh...?"

"Heh. Your foresight is shallow, Lina Inverse! Who do you think is responsible for the sardine golem's speed dropping midway!?"

Following her words, I finally realized. The men I had knocked off with the Raywing tackle hadn't even shown a sign of surfacing.

And—The White Serpent Naga was, as it turns out, very compatible with *these* things.

"...I see..."

I nodded deeply while looking at the mage floating face-down, having been stung by the countless jellyfish surrounding the golem.

"Oh. Welcome back."

Naga and I returned to Lily's villa around noon—just as Lily was sitting down at the dining table.

Beside her stood Sebastian the butler as usual, and a cook was bringing in soup on a cart.

As expected, there were no place settings for Naga and me.

"Oh. I'm so sorry. I haven't prepared a meal for you two. It's not like I thought, 'They probably just went to town to relax because they didn't want to help with the crab removal, even

though they claimed to be investigating, so there’s no meal for people like that.' It’s just that I thought investigating would take time, so you’d surely eat out."

"...Well, setting aside the talk of meals—"

Naga and I walked up to her.

"We had quite a harvest."

I said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"...W... What? A harvest...?"

"For example—"

Leaving my hand on her shoulder, I spun around on my heel.

"The identity of the mastermind. Right, Sebastian-san?"

"—What—!?"

Sebastian and the cook’s voices harmonized in surprise.

"The mastermind...?"

Only Lily, completely failing to understand what I was getting at, asked back.

"Exactly. There was someone providing financial aid to the poachers to harass you—and that person is you! Sebastian! —No, should I call you by your real name, Jack?"

"—Wh—What did you say!?"

Having finally understood the situation, Lily cried out, kicked over her chair, and stood up. She was pale, clearly in shock.

"Then—Sebastian was a fake name!? Ah! I thought it was such a butler-like name! And your real name is Jack! I can't believe I was using someone with such an un-butler-like name as my butler!"

She held her head and screamed.

That’s the big deal to you?

Sebastian—no, Jack—desperately tried to hide his surprise.

"...W... What are you talking about! What basis do you have for such a..."

"Your companion—that mage confessed everything."

".....!"

At my words, Jack froze on the spot.

After the pursuit of the sardine golem, we hauled the mage and the other two onto the

golem—who had been stung all over by the jellyfish Naga had summoned—and threatened them: "If you don't talk, we'll throw you back in the sea." They sang like birds.

Though it seemed they didn't know *why* Jack was helping them.

"You got hired under a fake name and harassed us while watching our moves. There were many local people who held a grudge against Lily-san, so it was easy to gather companions with money. You were beaten up by thugs before... but that was probably so you could play the victim and avoid being suspected as the mastermind. No doubt the plan was for you to pretend to get beaten, and then the thugs would actually beat Lily-san... but now that things have come to this, it's time to surrender!"

Naga and I took a step toward him.

"...Guh...! E... Enough! I won't let you!"

The moment Jack shouted...

"—Kyaa!?"

Lily screamed!

—What!?

Turning around in a panic, I saw the cook holding Lily in a chokehold.

Tch! He was in on it too!

"Don't move! If you move, this woman won't walk away unscathed!"

The cook shouted a cliché threat while holding a silver knife. Naga and I wore fearless grins.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You certainly make me laugh!"

"Do you really think we'd be flustered by such a cliché threat?"

"If something happens to this woman, we won't get our reward!"

"Tch! You're pretty good!"

"...No choice... I guess we have to do as they say..."

"...You two..."

Lily broke a small sweat at Naga and my reactions.

Jack and the others, using Lily as a shield, slowly backed away toward the entrance.

"Don't move, you two!"

With a victory grin, Jack opened the front door behind him and stepped outside with the cook—

DOKAPOON!

In that instant, the two of them were knocked flat by the golems waiting outside.

"...W... Wh... What is this...?"

"A trap Naga and I set."

I answered the bewildered Lily with a beaming smile as the golems stood nearby.

I hadn't thought the cook was in on it, but I had already considered the possibility that a cornered Jack might take Lily hostage. That's why before entering the mansion, Naga and I went to the beach and placed several golems that were doing the crab removal at the mansion's exits and instructed them to "Punch any man who comes out."

"...Now then..."

I walked up to the unconscious Jack and tied his hands behind his back before reviving him.

"...Ugh... guh... n... what...?"

"In case something like this happened, we had our golems waiting to knock you out."

"...Tch...!"

At my declaration, Jack's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"...So? Why did you want to harass her so much that you'd spend money and stir up poachers?"

"...Heh... it's all her father's fault..."

He glared at Lily.

"My father!?"

"Yes. This is revenge for that! Before you were born... originally, this beach was mine... and then... just because I didn't pay back a debt of twenty thousand gold coins from gambling and womanizing, he took this beach from me!"

"That's just a petty grudge!"

WHAM!

"Gugefuh!"

The simultaneous kicks from Naga, Lily, and me silenced Jack for good.

Thus, all the poachers were arrested.

For the remaining days, Naga and I fully enjoyed our time at the private beach, even while Lily continued to throw indirect (or maybe direct) insults and complaints our way.

And on the final day, we were to receive our full reward from Lily—

"...You... don't... have any...?"

...Zazaaaaan...

On the villa's veranda, listening to the sound of the waves, Naga and I were staring in disbelief.

"Yes. It seems that Jack was taking the money to buy up the sea urchins and crabs from our safe, so there is almost no cash here now. I can pay you about ten gold coins each. If you are unsatisfied, you can accompany me to my family home—which is about a month's journey from here—or wait here for another year, and I believe I can have it ready. —Of course, I cannot pay you for the journey or for your time while you wait. What will you do?"

...Wh...

WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT!?

Setting aside the trouble of beating the poachers, I endured all those insults from Lily just for ten gold coins!?

If I want the full amount, I have to follow her for free or wait here for a year!?

Ho-hooo... so that's how she wants to play it... in that case—

"...I understand... if that's all you can pay, it can't be helped..."

"—Wait, Lina!?"

Ignoring Naga's protest, I pointed sharply from the terrace toward the beach.

"So. You don't mind if I fire off a spell toward that area to blow off some stress, do you?"

"Of course. If that will make you feel better."

She answered with a beaming smile.

Heh. She fell for it.

I smiled back and began chanting a spell. Beside me, Lily watched with a smile. She didn't realize what spell I was chanting. And she didn't notice that Naga had already slipped away inside the house.

And then—I controlled the spell and released it.

"Giga Slave!"

BOHYU!

In an instant, the beach and the space around it vanished.

—And so—

This incident came to an end.

The spell I cast—even at the cost of turning my hair white—created a massive bay where, for some reason, no fish ever come.

Lily was slumped over and crying, but she *did* give me permission.

I wouldn't say they lived happily ever after, but at any rate, the case was closed.

(The PB Battle: End)

Lacking Body and Heavy on the Palate

"Lina Inverse! Accept my challenge!"

"Alright, you asked for it! Explosion Array!"

Dudoooom!

"Nguwaaaaaaaaah!?"

And so, one incident came to an end—

"...Wait... Hold... Hold on a second!"

Just as I was playing the narration in my head and turning to leave, the voice of the man I had just blown away called out to my back.

Ah. He's pretty persistent.

I spun around on my heel.

"Yeah, yeah. Applying for a rematch, right? Okay, okay. Mega—"

"Wait, stop, that's not it! Listen to what I have to say!"

Still collapsed on the ground, the man waved his hands frantically and bellowed in a panicked tone.

Looking at him again, he seemed to be around forty. He was a middle-aged guy with a bit of white starting to mix into his hair, clad in light armor with several swords strapped to his back—a typical warrior style.

This happened just before noon on a certain day, along the highway.

When you become famous for various reasons like I have, it seems the world is full of thoughtless idiots who want to take you down to make a name for themselves, completely regardless of the nuisance they cause.

Case in point: this guy confirmed my name, immediately pointed a finger at me, and declared he was "challenging" me.

Judging him to be a nuisance, I saw no problem with blowing him away instantly with a spell.

However, if someone begs you to listen, the decent human thing to do is to give them a moment. It's not like it's too late to blow him away *after* listening.

"You say listen... but you definitely said 'challenge,' didn't you...?"

"...Hmph... I certainly said that... but nobody said we had to fight with magic! Attacking without even listening to what a person has to say is completely tactless..."

"Vibration Blast."

Hyubodon!

The shot I fired impacted the ground right next to the man as he tried to pick himself up, creating a small crater.

I gave the frozen man a beaming smile.

"Yes, yes. Get to the point, and make it snappy. I'm busy... well, maybe not *busy*, but I'm not so bored that I can afford to waste my time."

"...I... I get it. I... I am... challenging you to a... cooking battle! That's what I said!"

.....

"...A cooking... battle?"

"Exactly!"

I frowned and thought about it for a moment—

"Explosion Array."

Dudogooooon!

"Nuauaaaaaaaah!?"

The man went flying, tumbling through the air before hitting the dirt, and this time he didn't move an inch.

...Honestly... I wish people would stop messing with me.

And so, this incident was treated as if it never happened.

The end.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! So this is where you were! Lina Inverse!"

Gumu!

That sudden burst of idiotic laughter caused me to choke on a potato. It was noon that same day—I was having lunch at a diner in a certain town.

The culprit, of course, goes without saying. My self-proclaimed rival, the number one dresser of bizarre fashion, a wriggling pest produced by humanity, the infamous Naga the White

Serpent!

"Hmph! To think you'd be casually eating in a place like this while I was busy being lost! That’s a rather underhanded move!"

Ngumu! Gugugumuuuuu!

"Consider meeting me here to be your fate and give up! Now, be a good girl and treat me to lunch!"

Ngugugugumuuu!

Ignoring me as I struggled and choked, Naga vented her one-sided demands, marched over, and sat down in the chair opposite me.

"Hmph. Since you don't seem to have any objections, I’ll graciously join you."

...Nguhaaa!

"...Wait a minute, Naga!"

By the time I managed to swallow the potato and raise my voice in protest, Naga had already snatched several items off the table.

"Hm? Is something the matter?" Naga asked shamelessly, popping a piece of the salt-crust herb-roasted lamb I’d been looking forward to into her mouth.

"'Is something the matter?' my foot! Don't just appear out of nowhere and hijack someone's meal!"

"Hmph! You make me laugh, Lina Inverse! I believe I gave you a perfectly good chance to protest! It was your responsibility for failing to take it because you chose to choke on your food! Therefore, it’s only natural that you take the blame! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"What kind of logic is that!?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Don't try to cover it up with that stupid laugh!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho... uh..."

"...?"

"Ho... hohoho... hih..."

Before my frowning face, Naga began laughing strangely and started sliding out of her chair.

"...? What are you doing, Naga?"

"...Hmph... wait... somehow my stomach..."

Wh... What!? To think something could actually upset the stomach of the practically immortal

Naga! How terrifying! Salt-crust herb-roasted lamb!

As I was thinking that:

"Fuhahaha! You seem quite surprised! Lina Inverse!"

That voice suddenly rose from the side. When I turned toward it, there was a face I didn't recognize!

"...Who are you?"

The man fell silent for a moment at my frowning question.

"Who... you! Don't forget the face of the person you just blew away with a spell!"

"No... I mean... the number of people I blew away with spells this morning is well over ten..."

"What kind of life are you leading!?"

"Shut up! I just got harassed by a bunch of thugs in town and blew them away, so the numbers are high!"

"...I... I see... Then, would you remember the man who challenged you to a cooking battle and got blown away!?"

"...Now that you mention it... there was someone like that."

At my words, the man puffed out his chest proudly.

"It seems you've finally remembered! You might not want to, but you *will* accept this battle no matter what! I won't let you say no! After all, the antidote is at stake!"

"...Antidote?"

"Exactly! I laced that lamb dish with the poison of the Spotted Purple Frog! It's not a strong poison, but unless you win the match against me and get the antidote..."

"You idiot!"

Boban!

The bottom of my empty steak plate, which I had launched the moment I spoke, made a direct hit on the man's face.

"If I eat it and get sick, there won't even be a match to begin with!"

"...Ah! Now that you mention it! H... However! All's well that ends well! The one who ate it was your friend! If you value your friend's life, accept my challenge!"

"I don't value it, so I'm fine."

.....

"Huh?"

The man’s eyes went wide at my blunt answer.

"...So anyway, ma'am, one more salt-crust herb-roasted lamb, please! Oh, and the bill goes to this middle-aged guy over here!"

"Wa... Wait a minute, you!"

"What? You’re the one who threw poison in it and made it inedible, so it stands to reason you should foot the bill for it."

"I'm not talking about the bill! To abandon your friend in their time of crisis... are you even human!?"

"Don't lecture me, you're the one who poisoned her!"

Whack!

I struck him right between the eyes with the edge of a large platter.

...Well... you see them often. The type of person who completely ignores their own actions and lectures others with a holier-than-thou attitude...

"Besides... it's fine because it's Naga."

"You're so heartless..."

Just as the man, clutching his head, began to grumble his protest:

"...Recovery."

With Naga's murmur, a pale light enveloped her body—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I am COM-PLETE-LY revived!"

She suddenly stood bolt upright and declared her resurrection with a laugh!

She pointed a sharp finger at the man from point-blank range.

"Hmph! Now that you've dared to poison the White Serpent Naga, I hope you're prepared for the consequences!?"

"Ah. I'll treat you to something good later, so just be quiet for a bit."

"Hmph! That's fine then!"

Is it? Well, if she’s happy with it, I guess it’s fine...

After silencing Naga, the man turned back to me.

"Anyway, the cooking battle—"

"I said no."

"...Urgh..."

As I turned him down flat again, the man fell silent with a difficult expression for a while. Then, he suddenly clapped his hands.

"That means—you forfeit. My victory by default! Is that acceptable?"

"Yeah, yeah. Sure."

At my listless reply, the man’s face suddenly lit up.

"Fuhahaha! I won! I won! I, Galbart Hammer! Against that woman's sister!"

Twitch!

...Greeee...

"Wa... Wait a minute..."

I turned my neck with a creak and asked the man in a strained voice.

"...By 'that woman,' you don't happen to mean... a waitress at a restaurant called 'Rearlancer' in some place called Zephilia...?"

"That's the one..."

"Nguhaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

I instinctively clutched my head and screamed as I leaned back in my chair.

Th... That’s my older sister back home!

"Wait a minute! I revoke my forfeiture!"

"What!? Such a sore loser..."

"Forget that! How on earth did things end up this way!? Depending on the story, my reaction is going to change!"

"Hmph! It’s simple! I challenged your sister, and she said, 'I might consider it if you can beat my little sister'! Therefore, I must defeat you no matter what... hey, why are you clutching your head and crouching down in the middle of my story!?"

Uuuuuuaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.

S... So this involves my sister back home!?

In... In that case, no matter what form this battle takes, I absolutely cannot lose! If I lose here, who knows what she’ll do to me!?

I somehow managed to pull myself together and stood up straight.

"I... I get it! I accept this cooking battle!"

"But you just said forfeiture was fine..."

"Shut up! That was then, this is now! Anyway, it’s a match!"

"Hmph... very well! I intended for this from the start! Prepare yourself!"

Sparks flew as our eyes met!

And so, a cooking battle that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I staked my life on had begun!

"I'm glad you came without fear! Lina Inverse!"

Galbart’s gravelly voice echoed through the kitchen, which was cluttered with ingredients and cooking utensils. This was the same eatery where Galbart had thrown down the gauntlet yesterday. The man and woman who ran the place had overheard the talk of a cooking battle and, since it was their day off and might be a good learning experience for their young cooks, they offered the space.

And so, the cooking showdown was held during the morning hours. Present were myself, Galbart, Naga, the shop owners, and two young cooks.

The owner said with a smile, "Well then, Naga-san and the rest of us will handle the taste-testing."

"What!?"

Galbart let out an exaggerated cry of surprise.

"Hmph! No need to worry! Even though the White Serpent Naga is an acquaintance of Lina's, I would never give an unfair judgment!"

"...I don't know what you're talking about... but fine. It's what you wanted. But once we start, I won't allow any mid-match withdrawals!"

After saying something nonsensical, Galbart turned back to me.

"The match is simple! We each make one dish, and the opponent and all the judges eat about five spoonfuls each!"

Five spoonfuls each... that’s a weird condition... but whatever...

"We repeat this process, and the first one to take down their opponent with the sheer nastiness of their dish wins!"

"...Huh?"

Ignoring the collective cry of surprise from everyone, Galbart continued.

"By the way, the use of poisons, including sleeping pills and paralyzing agents, is forbidden! The goal is to defeat your opponent using taste alone! Got it!?"

"Of course I don't get it!" I screamed.

"What!? Are you saying you want permission to use poison!?"

"No! Normally, a cooking battle is about who can make the most delicious food, right!? What is this!? A 'Who Can Make the Worst Food' battle!?"

"'Normally,' you say!? Hmph! How naive! I said a cooking *match*! Something influenced by the judges' preferences or moods can't be called a 'match'! A match is about defeating or being defeated! There is no clearer conclusion than that! Or will you admit defeat and abandon the match!?"

Ugh...!? I... I see... so he's that kind of guy...

Now I finally understand why my sister turned down a cooking match...

However, since it involves my sister, I absolutely cannot lose! Even if I look like this, thanks to being trained by her, I'm confident I can make pretty delicious food.

Conversely, if I intentionally ignore every single point of making food delicious, I should be able to make something truly disgusting!

"...I never said I'd quit! Fine! Let's do it!"

"Good! It's settled! By the way, if the match drags on and neither side goes down, the one who takes down the most judges wins. Is that okay?"

"I'm counting on it!"

"...Excuse me. Thinking about it, I have supplies to get for tomorrow, so I'll..."

"Oh, dear. My laundry..."

"I have to go observe the ditch in the backyard..."

"Ah. It's the time of day when I have to go talk to the wall in my room."

"Hmph. Come to think of it, I have a scheduled showdown with the stray dog on the corner..."

"Wait right there, you guys."

Thip-thip-thip!

Bamboo skewers I threw embedded themselves in the wooden door right before the judges as they tried to flee.

"N-n-n-n. You think you can run away now? It's too late. We're all in this together now. You're going to taste every bit of it."

"...Lina... your eyes are scary..."

"Keke... Just so you know, even if you run, I'll hunt you to the ends of the earth and drag you back, so get ready."

I gave Naga a firm declaration and turned back to Galbart.

"Now! Let the match begin!"

My own voice had a clearly desperate ring to it, even to my own ears...

"Gugefu-gwuo!?"

That was the moment everyone took a bite of the first dishes from both sides.

A groan of admiration escaped from everyone's mouth.

—Of course—

It wasn't an admiration of deliciousness.

It was the kind of groan that asks: "How on earth did you manage to turn perfectly normal ingredients into such horrific objects?"

It wasn't something mild like using too much seasoning or the wrong kind.

It was truly a hideous parody and profanity of the concept of "cooking."

For the record, Galbart served a fish dish.

The presentation was surprisingly beautiful. Despite being more than thoroughly cooked, the fishy smell and the raw scent of vegetables were still alive, and the hidden herb gave the overall taste a harsh, acrid bite. It was heavy on the palate and lacked any body, yet a foul aftertaste lingered in the mouth forever...

.....

I CAN'T EAT THIS!

If I were told to eat this, I'd rather be served a whole head of cabbage, told it was a "vegetable salad," and be charged ten gold coins.

Normally, I would have flipped the table and gone on a rampage instantly, but the moment I put my hand on the edge of the table, my sister's face popped into my head, and I barely managed to hold back.

—I was too scared to taste it myself, but the dish I made seemed to be quite something too, as over there, Galbart was twitching.

Even so, he turned his face toward me and forced a smirk.

"...K... Heh...! Y... You're not bad... kid!"

"I... I didn't do it because I wanted to, but, you know..."

Though I was more than a little twitchy myself, I returned his smirk with a fearless one.

"Hmph... However!"

Galbart flipped his spoon and—*gulp-gulp-gulp!*—downed four more spoonfuls in one breath!

"Gumu-ugogogogoguguuuuuuu!"

His face turned purple as he clawed at his throat, yet he somehow managed to swallow, turned to me, and smirked.

...Tch...!

Right. According to the rules, we have to eat five spoonfuls of each dish. In short, I have to experience this nastiness four more times.

...This might... be the most painful battle I've ever experienced... or will ever experience...

That premonition raced through my mind.

Raising my spoon and staring at the plate, I tried to find a weakness in Galbart's cooking.

It looked like a decent fish dish. However, its taste was nothing short of a profanity against "food."

But—

Just as any dish has its delicious parts and its average parts, this dish must have parts that are "somewhat better"!

If I could just find that weakness, the battle would become a bit easier... even if a "walkover" was out of the question.

The soup must be where all the essence of the nastiness is concentrated... and the bland vegetables must have soaked up that essence.

In that case...

"—Is it this!?"

I reached my spoon toward the flesh of the fish! It certainly smelled fishy, but if I could just endure that, it should be fine!

I popped it into my mouth and—

.....

In that moment, for the first time in my life, I learned something.

I learned that there are things in this world that are so nasty your vision actually turns white.

I knew it was fishy. I thought I was prepared.

BUT! I never imagined it would be this bad!

How can I even describe it...? Words feel inadequate...

If I had to try and convey even a fraction of the intensity of this taste: it was like if you took a mouthful of water from a pond in midsummer that had turned green with algae and had dead fish floating on the surface—that's the kind of fishiness we're talking about.

...Th... Then, I'll eat the green vegetables to cancel out the taste!

I took a scoop and brought it to my mouth—

—

Have you ever eaten raw chrysanthemum leaves? If not, I want you to try it just once. When I was little, I tried it once and vowed to the first star of the evening that I would never do it again as long as I lived—

The green vegetables in Galbart's fish dish tasted like an illusion that raw chrysanthemum leaf juice was multiplying inside my mouth.

...T... Terrifying! This dish has no weaknesses!

"...Kekeke... What's wrong, Lina Inverse? That was only your third spoonful."

.....*Grind*.....

At Galbart's words, I grit my teeth and moved my spoon toward the plate again.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Suddenly.

Naga started her idiotic laughter after everyone had finished the second dishes from both sides.

"...Naga... don't tell me you're quitting the judging now...?"

They say delicious food can soothe a person's heart. And they say truly disgusting food can make a person feel murderous. Especially now, right after eating Galbart's second dish—a vegetable dish. With an aftertaste like a live slug was crawling around in my mouth, it's impossible *not* to feel homicidal.

I spoke with murderous eyes, and Naga, with bloodshot eyes, replied:

"Hmph! In that case, I'm joining this battle too! If I win, you have to let me quit being a

judge! Got it!?"

"Whaaaaaat?"

"Interesting! If you think you can win, go ahead and try!"

"I'll crush you along with Lina Inverse!"

At Naga's sudden challenge, Galbart and I were fuming.

—Of course.

Thinking back later, Naga's challenge was completely off-base. Even if she joined the battle, it didn't change the fact that she had to keep eating Galbart's and my cooking. And on the other hand, for Galbart and me, we'd have to eat one more nasty dish, so there was no merit—in fact, it just made us more miserable.

—You've probably realized it by now. At this point, everyone's brains were completely paralyzed by the sheer nastiness of the food.

And—

"In that case—I'll challenge you too!"

"Then I'll do it too!"

"I'll do it! Me too! I'll do it!"

"Then naturally! I must do it as well! Thirty-five months of peeling potatoes! I might look like this, but I'm quite picky when it comes to making nasty food!"

"How insolent! Interesting! I'll take you all on!"

As all the judges volunteered, Galbart—whose brain was clearly paralyzed too—fumed, and—

"Fine by me! I'll take on anyone's challenge!"

I, also paralyzed, accepted the challenge.

And then—the nightmare began.

—How much time—had passed? Moments and eternity no longer held any meaning for us.

We just mindlessly made food and mindlessly endured eating it with a feeling like we were dying—or rather, shoveling it into our mouths and dropping it into our stomachs—

How many times did we repeat that?

The shop owner, his wife, the two young cooks, and the shop staff—a total of four people—were already slumped over with the whites of their eyes showing.

However—perhaps they were the lucky ones.

"N-f-f-f-f-f-f-f-f-f."

"Ho... hohohohohohohohoho."

"Kekekekekekekekeke."

With our hair literally turning white, the three of us—Naga, Galbart, and I—continued the death match.

A meat sauce pasta boiled until it looked like a drowned earthworm, with a strange sweetness that gave me the chills.

A paella with the aroma of an old cupboard and a rusty frying pan, fully utilizing the flavor of old, spoiled oil.

A sour pork sauté with wine sauce that completely killed the deliciousness of the meat and brought only its gaminess and greasiness to the forefront.

Anyway, we were eating these hellish items one after another, even if it was only five spoonfuls at a time. It's impossible *not* to go crazy.

When I thought about it later, we were even eating the nasty food we made ourselves at that point, so it's terrifying to imagine just how far gone we were.

"...Guh-ha!"

Simultaneously swallowing the fifth spoonful, the three of us placed our spoons on the table.

"...Kekeke... you're not bad, you brats..."

Breathing heavily, Galbart kicked over his chair and stood up.

"But the games end here! It's time to settle this for real!"

"That's my line!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Naga and I also stood up, and the three of us headed for the kitchen—

And there, for the first time.

The three of us realized.

The ingredients the shop owner had prepared were almost entirely gone.

Well, the owner probably assumed the match would be about making a few delicious dishes and gathered materials accordingly, so it stands to reason that making this many varieties of strange food would lead to a shortage of materials.

Stands to reason—and yet...

"...What do we do... about this?"

"...What do we do... you say..."

"Either way, we can't do anything without materials."

Galbart, Naga, and I spoke one after another and fell silent for a while—

"Hmph... then it can't be helped..."

It was Galbart who broke the silence.

"In that case, we'll settle this as originally planned: a battle of swords! Surely you won't run! Lina Inverse!"

"...N-f-f-f... at this point, whatever..."

.....

Just as I was about to agree—

Suddenly, a question crossed my mind.

"...Wait a minute, old man... 'As originally planned'...? You don't mean... you actually intended to fight me with swords from the very beginning...?"

"Of course! Your sister didn't specify *how* we should fight! However! After getting blown away the moment we met, I realized a direct fight would be strategically disadvantageous, so I instantly switched to a cooking match! But then, thinking about it further, I'm bad at cooking, so I came up with the logic of a 'nastiness match'! But now, there's no meaning in continuing this farce! Let's settle this quickly with swords!"

"...Ho-hooo..."

I wonder if Galbart noticed the aura of murderous intent rising from Naga and me.

"...So... you mean... challenging my sister was also a sword match, not a cooking match?"

"Naturally!"

"Hmph... so that means someone like the White Serpent Naga was forced to participate in a mere farce until her hair turned white?"

"That's how it is! Now, what will you do, Lina Inverse! Accept my challenge!?"

"N-n-n-n-n..."

Slowly, I took a step forward.

I could tell my eyes were completely fixed.

I see. I get it. That's how it is.

For such a stupid reason, I’ve been forcing myself to eat disgusting food all this time...

"Fine! I'll take you on! Right here, right now!"

"Fuhahahahaha. I’m joining in too, Lina."

Naga and I gripped a rolling pin and a pestle!

—And shortly after—

Naga and I left the kitchen, which was filled with a horrific smell, leaving behind a battered and beaten Galbart.

For the record, I should add that Galbart was incredibly weak.

And so, one incident came to an end.

—No.

It was only then that I realized.

Truth be told, this whole thing had ended long ago, at the point where I blew Galbart away at the very beginning—

With nothing but a sense of emptiness in my heart, I closed the kitchen door—

P.S.

To the shop owner and his wife who got caught up in this, I’m sorry.

(Lacking Body and Heavy on the Palate: End)

Amelia’s Local Travelogue

The world was, for the most part, at peace.

Sure, there were minor skirmishes near national borders, and demons or monsters ran amok here and there, but that wasn't exactly a new development. It was, so to speak, a long-standing tradition.

And here—right here—was one of those classic, everyday scenes.

"Heh... there's nowhere left to run, girl."

"Give it up."

Spouting textbook threats in a slimy tone, the men took another step forward. The swords in their hands flashed as they caught the sunlight filtering through the trees.

The woman instinctively stepped back until her spine hit the trunk of a tree. She looked to be in her early twenties—a beauty with long red hair. But that beauty was currently twisted in fear and tension.

There were five men. Lacking any martial arts training, she couldn't judge their skill, but one thing was clear: breaking through this circle and escaping was impossible for her.

"...Ugh!"

Leaning against the tree, she let out a small groan and, in a fit of desperation, drew the dagger at her waist.

But the men didn't stop their mocking, sneering grins.

"Hoho. You really think you can take us on with that?"

"How stupid. If you hadn't resisted, we would've made it a quick death."

"Well, if you want to struggle, go ahead. In the end—"

One of the men readjusted his sword. His eyes held a clear intent to kill.

"—it doesn't change the fact that you're dead!"

Just as he roared and lunged!

"How foolish!"

A voice echoed through the trees—a young woman’s... no, a young girl's voice. Obviously, it hadn't come from the woman in front of them.

"What!?"

The men froze. They looked around frantically, but no one was in sight—

"Up there!"

At one man's shout, everyone looked up. There, perched on a branch and blending into the dappled sunlight, was a single figure!

"The Heavens call! The Earth calls! The People call! The wind carries the thundering roar to me, bidding me to defeat evil!"

"....."

Confronted with this sudden theatrical speech, the group stood frozen, unsure of how to react.

"To destroy the world's evils, to punish the darkness in people's hearts..."

"Toh!"

Thwack.

Rustle-crash-thud!

One of the men, snapping back to his senses, had casually tossed a rock. It scored a direct hit, and the figure tumbled unceremoniously through the leaves and hit the ground.

The figure was—

"A kid!?"

One of the men cried out in surprise.

Yes. The person who had fallen was a girl of about thirteen or fourteen, wearing a white cape and white clothes, with black hair cut at her shoulders.

"Based on the voice, I figured it was a girl..."

"I was expecting something weirder to fall out..."

"I was kind of hoping for a creature that sounded like a girl but turned out to be some unrecognizable monster," another added, sounding disappointed.

Ignoring the men’s chatter, the girl suddenly sprang up and clung to a nearby tree trunk.

"Don't bother climbing back up," the red-haired woman said coldly, grabbing the girl’s cape to stop her. Apparently, the situation was so bizarre that the thought of using the distraction to escape hadn't even crossed her mind.

"But! I wasn't finished with my lines...!"

"Forget it. So? Who are you supposed to be?"

The girl looked a bit dissatisfied but hopped down to the ground. She pointed a finger dramatically at the men and declared:

"I sensed the presence of evil and have come to deliver justice!"

A moment of silence. And then—

The men burst out laughing. Even the woman who was supposed to be the victim joined in.

"S-so what? This little lady is going to 'deliver justice' to us?"

"Fireball!"

BOOM.

The girl's response was a spell and an explosion.

With that single strike, only two people remained standing: the girl and the woman.

"...W-wow, you're actually pretty strong," the woman marveled, looking at the men who were now charred and twitching, without even having had time to scream.

"As long as a love for justice dwells within my heart, I shall never yield to evil! Well then! That’s that!"

"—Hold on a second."

Just as the girl made her grand statement and turned to leave, the woman grabbed her cape again.

"If your hobby is taking down bad guys... how about it? Want to take on a little job?"

"A... job?"

The girl looked reluctant, but the woman whispered:

"There are some very 'fresh' villains nearby who are just begging for justice."

"Really!?"

At those words, the girl’s eyes sparkled.

"If that's the case, I’d be happy to help!"

"Great. I’m Diana."

"And you can call me—" the girl said, firmly shaking Diana’s hand. "Amelia!"

"This is my house."

Diana pointed proudly to a stylish, white-walled house near the center of town.

They were in the Holy Kingdom of Seirune. Two days north of the capital, Seirune City, over a small mountain, lay this place: Priam City.

"Hmph."

Amelia gave a disinterested response. Diana looked annoyed for a second but forced a smile back onto her face.

"I might not look it, but I'm a merchant with quite a reputation in this town."

"Is that so?"

Amelia's polite but hollow tone made Diana snap, "Yes, it is!" before stomping toward the entrance. She ordered the butler to bring tea and led Amelia to the guest room.

"So, who and where are they!? The evil I must defeat!"

The moment they sat down, Amelia cut straight to the chase.

"...W-well, you don't waste time... I like that..." Diana stammered, slightly intimidated by Amelia's intensity. "You saw that small castle in the middle of town, right? It belongs to Lord Zaien, who rules this area. Lord Zaien is the one behind the villainy."

"What did you say!?"

Amelia slammed a foot onto the table and clenched her fist.

"To hold the position of Lord, a protector of the people, and commit evil in the shadows... how utterly unforgivable!"

"...Um... that table was actually quite expensive..."

"Never mind the table! Those who commit evil deserve divine punishment! If the Heavens will not pass judgment, then I shall do it in their stead!"

"Right... good luck with that..."

Once she had finished her speech and calmed down, Amelia sat back in her chair.

"So! What kind of evil is he committing!?"

"Well..." Diana rubbed her temples. "I go in and out of the Lord's place for business, and that's how I found out. It seems the Lord is involved in drug trafficking."

"Drugs!?"

"Yes. Those men who attacked me on the road were probably hired by the Lord. To kill me because I knew too much."

"How terrible!"

Amelia slammed her foot onto the table again.

"To hold the position of Lord, a protector of the people—"

"I heard that part. You just said it."

"Regardless! Now that it's decided, it's time for justice!"

"Wait—"

Before Diana could stop her, Amelia had dashed out of the room.

"You idiots!"

The booming, raucous voice made the five men flinch and cover their ears. Standing before them was a middle-aged man in extravagant clothes with a fine beard, though his face and build were rather pathetic. This man was Lord Zaien, the ruler of the town.

"Do you think 'we failed' is enough of an excuse!? Listen—rumor has it that Crown Prince Philionel has set out on a regional inspection tour. If word of what we're doing reaches his ears, do you have any idea what will happen!? I'll lose my title, and you won't be able to enjoy the perks anymore—no, you'll be out on the street, or worse, executed alongside me! Do you understand!?"

"W-we are terribly sorry!"

One of the men bowed his head in apology.

The five men who had attacked Diana on the road were actually knights under Zaien's command. Well, "knights" was a generous term; since they were helping Zaien with drug trafficking, they were no better than common thugs—actually, worse.

"A strange meddler got in the way... she looked like a mere girl, but she could use magic. She caught us off guard with a spell..."

"Failure is failure, regardless of the reason."

Lord Zaien cut the man off coldly.

"That woman likely realized I was behind it. She might be planning a counterattack. Before that happens—"

Knock, knock.

A soft sound at the door interrupted the Lord.

"What is it!?" he yelled irritably.

An elderly civil servant opened the door and shuffled in.

"...Ah... there is a guest who wishes to see the Lord..."

The Lord grew even more frustrated at the man’s slow pace.

"Argh! I told you not to let anyone in while I was in the middle of—"

Zaien stopped himself. *Wait, could it be that woman? Or maybe Prince Philionel’s party!?*

"Fine! Who is it, and what do they want!?"

Either way, he needed to know. The old official thought for a moment, as if trying to remember.

"...Ah... something about a girl passing through who wants to... 'deliver justice' to the Lord...?"

"Don't let her in! Someone like that—!"

"Too late!"

A ringing voice drowned out the Lord’s anger.

"What!?"

"T-that voice!?"

Zaien and his men stared in shock as the door burst open and a figure stepped inside.

Sparkle!

Lord Zaien froze instantly. He recognized that face. In his capacity as Lord, he had attended kingdom events and seen her several times. Her adorable appearance—so unlike her father’s—had left an impression.

The second daughter of Prince Philionel, first in line to the throne of the Holy Kingdom of Saillune. Her name was Amelia Wil Tesla Saillune!

Whaaaaaaaaat!? Why is royalty personally coming here to 'deliver justice' to me!?

While the Lord’s head was spinning in confusion, his men—ignorant of the situation—stepped forward.

"You! That brat from before! How did you get in here!?"

Amelia puffed out her chest proudly and pointed a finger at the frail old official.

"I just walked in right behind that old gentleman, and nobody stopped me!"

"You! Are you an ally of that woman!?"

"Exactly!"

"Sorry, kid, but we can't let the King find out about the drugs! We’re gonna have to finish you off!"

By the time Lord Zaien snapped out of it, the situation had escalated beyond any chance of a peaceful explanation.

"Y-you guys...!"

"We know!"

"We won't mess up this time!"

Misinterpreting the Lord’s attempt to stop them, the men drew their swords and lunged at Amelia all at once!

They didn't give her time to chant a spell. They were certain of their victory.

But—

The man in the lead froze for a split second. He couldn't believe his eyes. His blow, fueled by overconfidence, might have lacked some sharpness.

But still—

He never expected a young girl to catch his blade with her bare hands and *snap* it!

Before the man could react:

"Hah!"

Wham!

Amelia’s right fist buried itself in the man’s solar plexus. Without even a scream, he lost consciousness and was sent flying!

"What!?"

A man standing behind him, not even understanding what had happened, was caught in the collision and sent flying too, landing near the Lord with his eyes rolled back.

"Hieeeeeee!?"

As Zaien shrieked, a kick from Amelia sent another confused man crashing to the ground.

"...This brat!?"

"She's strong!"

With three men down in the blink of an eye, the remaining two realized Amelia’s strength and cautiously kept their distance.

Watching from outside the fray, Lord Zaien felt completely cornered. Thanks to his subordinates’ rashness, they had blabbed about the drug trade in front of royalty and then

attacked her. There was no way to talk his way out of this.

Execution! It's definitely execution!

Faking his way through was impossible. But there was one way to survive. If he could escape this room, grab his fortune, and flee to another country... He would lose his title and power, but his life was more important.

To do that, he needed an opening—

Dash!

While Amelia was staring down the two men, Zaien bolted for a nearby wall. He reached for a hidden switch—

A hole opened in the wall, and Zaien slid inside without hesitation. Secret doors, secret rooms, and secret passages were essential for a corrupt lord.

"L-Lord Zaien!?"

"Don't leave us behind!"

Feeling abandoned, the two remaining men tried to follow Zaien while keeping their swords pointed at Amelia.

That created an opening. A small one—but enough for Amelia to strike.

Amelia kicked off the floor. By the time the men turned their attention back to her, she had snatched a fallen sword and hurled it at them.

"Ugh!?"

One of the men reflexively parried the flying sword. But in that instant of vulnerability, Amelia lunged into his guard.

Crack!

A rising uppercut caught the man squarely on the chin. The last man scrambled to avoid being caught in his falling comrade’s path. But Amelia had already predicted his movement.

Thud.

An elbow strike landed directly on his face. Once she confirmed he was out, Amelia dove into the secret passage.

Zaien heard footsteps approaching from behind.

"...Damn it!"

He clicked his tongue and started running again. He couldn't see his pursuer, but knowing only

one person was following let him guess the situation.

"...Useless fools! If it's come to this..."

Soon, he emerged from the secret passage into a guest room in another part of the castle. To survive, he had to escape, but with Amelia in the way, that seemed impossible.

If so—he had to kill her. That was his conclusion. He had hired a top-tier bodyguard just in case Diana caused trouble, and he never expected it to come in handy like this.

"Master! Please!"

"...Fufufufu..."

In response to the Lord's frantic plea as he burst into the room, a dark, muffled laugh echoed back.

Shing.

With the metallic ring of a sword being drawn, a dull silver light flashed in the dim room. A strange, chilling bloodlust filled the air, making the Lord instinctively step back. Even though he was the employer, he found himself using polite language under the pressure of that aura.

"—So... I finally get to cut someone."

She stepped slowly out of the room. A young woman—about twenty years old. She was a beauty with long black hair tied in a ponytail, but—

What stood out most were the many swords strapped to her waist and back. Right now, she held a foreign-style single-edged longsword in her right hand.

"O-of course! Someone is chasing me, so please, cut them down! Remy-san!"

"Ufu... ufufufufufu. Fine. I'll cut them into little pieces for you."

She spoke with completely glazed-over eyes and casually licked the blade.

"I found you!" Amelia's voice rang out.

Amelia felt a shiver run down her spine. It was the bloodlust emanating from the female swordsman. She could tell by the aura: this opponent was on an entirely different level from the five men she had just defeated.

Even if she tried to close in, the woman had multiple weapons. An attack with a dagger or something similar would be the end.

Then, I'll use spells from a distance—

At that moment:

"Remy Martin... coming through!"

With a lethal shout, the swordsman kicked off the floor! A flash of silver followed her lunge.

Fast!

Amelia scrambled back. She was too busy dodging to even find an opening to counter. Even if she dodged one blow, the sword would flip around for another. Against such a fluid series of attacks, her only choice was to retreat.

But even while retreating, she could chant a simple spell.

"Raywing!"

It was a point-blank strike, impossible to dodge.

But! By a hair’s breadth, with a movement that exceeded Amelia’s expectations, Remy dodged the spell.

"—So you use spells..." Remy muttered, then cautiously readjusted her distance.

"Why are you siding with evil when you have such skill!?"

"...Heh..." Remy let out a small smile. "I don't care about good or evil... As long as I get to cut something, I'm happy!"

Faced with such a dangerous statement, Amelia didn't flinch.

"Then, if you cut down the villains instead of the good guys, wouldn't you be able to cut all you want without any problems!?"

Twitch.

"Cut all I want..." At that alluring phrase, Remy’s shoulders trembled slightly.

"...Ufu... ufufufufufufu..."

Remy slowly turned around to face the Lord, licking the silver blade.

"You have a point..."

"W-wait a minute!" Zaien shrieked as Remy approached him.

"Eeeeeeeeeeek!"

Terrified, the Lord collapsed in place. Remy raised her sword—

"Wait!"

Amelia’s voice from behind made Remy stop. She turned slowly.

"Don't tell me you're going to say 'don't cut him' after all?"

"I won't!"

"Please say it!" Zaien cried.

"Why is Lady Amelia even in a place like this anyway!?"

"Because I was bored at the palace!"

"Nwaaaaaaaaagh!"

At Amelia’s blunt answer, Lord Zaien clutched his head.

"But... how did you find out about the drugs?"

"Diana-san told me! Now! You're going to tell me everything about the drug trafficking organization you were involved with!"

At that, Zaien frowned and whispered:

"...You don't know? The merchant I turned a blind eye to for drug trafficking... is that Diana Craine."

"—I’ve been waiting, Amelia-san."

When Amelia and Remy dragged the tied-up Lord Zaien into Diana’s house, she was standing alone in the incense-filled entrance hall. She had changed into different clothes—a loose-fitting, exotic outfit with a veil covering her mouth, giving her the aura of a mysterious fortune-teller.

"I heard the story!"

Amelia pointed a finger at Diana.

"Using money and charm to get Lord Zaien to overlook the drug trade! And then using *me* to try and eliminate the Lord—how utterly diabolical! Therefore! I shall deliver the hammer of justice!"

"...Heh..." Diana looked unfazed, even letting out a small laugh. "I didn't exactly lie. The Lord *was* involved in the drug trade. And he *did* try to get rid of me because I knew about it. Right?"

"...Ugh..." Zaien was speechless.

"Probably... you heard the rumor that Prince Philionel of Seirune was on an inspection tour and thought it would be bad if the drugs were discovered. So you planned to kill me and play innocent. That’s about right, isn't it?"

Having her secret hit squarely on the mark, Diana fell silent.

"Heh... then I should just cut this woman too, right? Amelia?"

Remy stepped forward, licking her blade, but Diana just looked back with a confident gaze.

"Whether you should cut me or not... you don't even need to think about it."

"I don't?"

As Remy frowned, Zaien let out a groan and fell to his knees, still tied up.

"...N-no way...?"

"Exactly," Diana nodded proudly. "The moment I sent Amelia to your place, I knew there would be a fight. If Amelia lost, I'd deal with you, Zaien. If she won and learned the truth, I'd deal with her. So, I prepared accordingly."

"...Drugs... huh..."

Even as his consciousness faded, the Lord managed to force out the words.

"That's right. This place is filled with drug incense. I'm fine thanks to this special veil. Once you're high on the drugs and don't know what's going on... I'll dispose of you."

"Unforgivable, Diana!"

"What!?" Diana's smile froze at Amelia's voice.

"To use such a foolish trick at a time like this!"

Zaien was indeed on his knees, but Amelia and Remy showed no signs of being affected by the drug.

"Impossible! The drugs aren't working!?"

"When you have a heart that loves justice, petty tricks won't work!"

"Compared to the desire to cut things, a little drug like this is nothing. Fufufufufufufufu."

"...You... idiots..." Zaien's whisper reached Diana's ears. "...What did you expect... from raising the tension... of people who are already high-strung... with drugs...?"

"Hieeeeeeee! Oh nooooooo!"

As Diana shrieked, Remy turned her completely glazed eyes toward her, a sword in her left hand now too.

"Number one! Remy! I'm cutting!"

"Number two! Amelia! I'm not stopping her!"

"Kyaaa! Stop! I'm sorry!"

Diana's scream echoed through the house.

—And so.

One—no, two evils were destroyed.

But as long as evil exists in this world, Amelia's mission of justice will never end!

Is it just my imagination, or would it be better to deal with Remy first before worrying about other evils!?

Regardless, Amelia's boredom-killing local travelogue continues!

Pardon me.

The Road You Travel...

Crash!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! So this is where you were, Lina Inverse! I've been looking everywhere for you!"

That day, the sound of a familiar, obnoxious laugh echoed through the restaurant just as I was finishing my dinner.

Clatter!

Without a word, I kicked back my chair and stood up.

—The story goes back more than ten days—

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! So annoying!"

I screamed right after I'd knocked out "Candidate Number 12," the self-proclaimed "Dazzling Biology Teacher," with a single spell.

It all started a while back. The head of the Mage Association in a town called Klandor heard rumors about me and, for some crazy reason, decided to "reform" Lina Inverse. He'd been sending members of the "Disciplinary Committee" as "tutors" one after another.

I managed to drive off the first self-proclaimed tutor, but they just kept coming. I'd been fending them off by blowing them up, talking them down, or filling their beds with worms (I know, mean), but this constant harassment was getting old.

I walked over to the teacher I'd just blasted, grabbed him by the collar, and hauled him up.

"...Ugh... how... how violent...!"

"Ho-ho-ho. So forcing 'education' on someone who didn't ask for it isn't violent? I've said this ten times already. Listen carefully: I don't need a tutor. Got it!?"

"...Heh... fufufufu... I see... It seems I wasn't qualified enough to be your tutor..."

"...Well, it's not just you..."

"...But don't think you've won just by getting rid of me... On behalf of the 425 members of the Klandor Mage Association Disciplinary Committee, we will educate you someday..."

"...There are *how many* of you? And you're telling me another 413 of you are going to keep showing up!?"

"...Heh... not 'occasionally'... 'constantly'!"

Hearing that so clearly made me feel a bit lightheaded. But getting dizzy wouldn't solve anything. There was only one thing to do!

"N-fufufufufufu... I get it now. There’s only one way to stop this! I’m going to Klandor myself and talking to the head of the association directly!"

"...Heh... you think the head will change his mind just because of that...?"

"Kuku... you're underestimating my 'direct talk.' I’ve turned forests into wastelands with my talks."

"...Isn't that... just a threat...?"

"Quiet! Anyway!" I tossed the man aside. "I’m coming for you, Klandor! Wash your neck and wait for me!"

As I shook my fist at the sky and shouted, a pigeon flew off into the air. ...Wait, why a pigeon?

"...Ugh... I won't... let you..." the man groaned at my feet. "...I’ve informed my comrades... Many Disciplinary Committee members will be waiting for you... You'll never make it... k-fufufufu..."

—Oh no! That was a carrier pigeon!

I looked back at the sky—

"Oh. A crow’s attacking it."

"...Huh...?"

We both watched the sky in silence for a moment.

"...Well... it's a dog-eat-dog world..."

"...This is why I hate living things... Fine! If it's come to this!"

The fallen man suddenly threw open his coat!

Scurry-scurry-scurry!

"What the—!?"

Countless tiny footsteps and squeaks filled the air. Mice, frogs, cats, and pigeons poured out of the man’s coat and bolted in every direction.

...Wait... were those *all* for messages!?

"...Kekeke... some of them are bound to get through..."

I stepped on him to shut him up.

"Heh! Interesting! Fine! I’ll break through your little trap!"

I made a vow to the sky once again.

—And so.

"♪ Klandor is waiting, wash your neck and wait for me ♪"

Humming a nonsense song, I headed down the road toward Klandor City. It was noon the day after I'd silenced the biology teacher.

But I couldn't exactly take it easy. That guy had scattered messenger animals everywhere. No doubt more "tutors" would be coming to stop me.

Actually, they were already here. I could feel people watching me among the travelers on the road. It was hard to pick them out from the crowd, though. I kept waiting for them to strike, even singing that annoying song to draw them out, but they didn't move.

...Hmm...

I could just pretend not to notice and keep going, but I'm not the type to sit with that kind of stress. So, what to do? Simple. If they won't come to me, I'll go to them!

I hadn't identified them yet, but I had a plan. I stopped in my tracks and yelled:

"Why don't you just give it up? I know you're following me!"

If they ignored me, it would be super awkward, but their goal was to stop me. If I said that, they wouldn't be able to ignore it.

Exactly as I thought.

The air grew tense for a second, and then—

"You noticed! Lina Inverse!"

A moment later, every single traveler around me turned toward me and spoke in unison!

"Whaaaa!?" I cried out. Every person here was a Disciplinary Committee member!?

There were about twenty or thirty of them. They formed a circle around me and started closing in.

"Kekeke... we've already heard from our comrade. Forget about your foolish plan and accept our 'education'!"

Another man spoke up, frowning. "Wait a minute. Why *your* education? Don't try to get ahead of us. As the 'Eternal Math Teacher,' I should be the one..."

"Wait! You're the one trying to get ahead! I should be the one..."

"No, me!"

"Me! Me!"

...It seemed they weren't working together at all...

"Dill Brand!"

Crack-crackle!

While they were arguing, a wide-range lightning spell knocked them all out before they could even scream.

"Heh. Pathetic!" I clenched my fist. "Now there are only about 400 left!
....."

Saying it out loud just made me depressed...

The road to Klandor was short. I'd lost count of how many committee members I'd fended off, but I was finally only two days away from Klandor!

I finished breakfast at the inn and was ready to leave.

"Wait a second, guest."

The innkeeper called out just as I was heading for the door.

"...Yes...?" I wondered if I'd forgotten something. The woman kept her customer-service smile as she said:

"The bill. You need to pay the bill."

"...Huh?" I frowned. I'd paid for the room in advance, and I'd paid for breakfast...

"Remember? I brought some fruit to your room yesterday."

"...Wait! That wasn't a service!?"

"Nope. That'll be 10,000 gold pieces."

Pfft!

I nearly choked at the ridiculous price. Just to be clear, the fruit she'd brought definitely wasn't worth 10,000 gold.

"...Wh-what!?"

As I stood there speechless, the woman's smile turned into a predatory grin.

"Well, if you can't pay, I guess there's no helping it. I'm not a monster, so..." Her grin widened. "If you can't pay, you'll just have to accept my 'education'..."

—This woman! I thought it was just a rip-off inn, but she's a committee member too!?

Damn it! No wonder this place was cheaper than the others—it was a booby trap!

"So... what'll it be? Lina-san?"

Hmm. Not bad, Disciplinary Committee. But don't underestimate Lina Inverse! I knew exactly how to handle this. I faked a worried face and scratched my head.

"...Hmm... I see... That fruit *was* pretty tasty..."

"So? 10,000 gold, or become my student?"

I gave a wry smile and nodded. "Well, it's not right to not pay for what I ate..."

"You're paying!?" The woman looked surprised.

I smiled and nodded. "Of course. Oh, but like I said, the fruit was tasty. So, for my tasting and review fee... that'll be 100,000 gold pieces from you."

"Wha—"

The woman stood frozen, speechless. I grinned at her.

"Of course, if you won't pay the 100,000 gold, I don't see why I should pay the 10,000. It wouldn't be fair, right?"

"...Wha—! That's ridiculous! I've never heard of a 100,000 gold tasting fee!"

"We're both being ridiculous, aren't we? I've never heard of 10,000 gold fruit either. So, let's settle the bill. Since it's a hassle to exchange money, you just give me 90,000 gold and we'll call it even. Or do you want to call the authorities and let them decide?"

"...Ugh...!"

She backed away slightly. "T-that's..."

There was a chance the authorities were also committee members, but based on their behavior so far, they were more interested in their own glory than working together. So she wouldn't call them.

"...Fine... I'll take back the 10,000 gold thing..."

She slumped her shoulders, but my smile only grew.

"Okay. By the way, I'm not taking back my 100,000 gold."

"Wait a minute! You!"

"...Yes...?"

"Don't give me that! You're taking advantage of me!"

"You're the one who started it. If you don't want to get bitten back, don't bite people in the

first place."

"Argh! You always have an answer! Fine, I'll use force! Get ready!"

...Seriously... if she was going to do that from the start, she could have saved us both the trouble...

"Fine, fine. Inverse Tornado Destruction!"

Whirr!

My right fist (with a twist) should have sent her flying... but...

Grab!

"What!?" I was the one who cried out. She'd dodged my punch by a hair and grabbed my arm! She was good!

"Hmph. You're ten years too early to beat me with that." She let go of my arm with a smug face.

I jumped back and kept my distance.

"...Heh... seems I underestimated you too... What's your name?"

"I am Jeremy! Advisor of the 'Gale Self-Defense Club,' Jeremy Portvillage! One of the 425 members of the Klandor Disciplinary Committee!"

"...I see..." I slowly circled her. "By the way... I've been meaning to ask... why do you call yourselves 'teachers' or 'advisors' if you're the 'Disciplinary Committee'?"

"You're still a kid if you don't know that! People hate admitting they're nobody, so they give themselves titles and make others call them 'Teacher' to satisfy their cheap self-esteem!"

...I'm sorry. If you're going to say it yourself, I have nothing to add.

She was impressive, in a way. But I still wasn't going to be her student!

"Fine, let's go! Dam Winu!"

Whoosh!

A strong wind spell blasted toward Jeremy! It wasn't lethal, but it was enough to knock someone off balance. And since it was wind, it was hard to dodge!

But!

"Heh! Too easy!" Jeremy smiled and swung her arm!

Wham!

The wind changed direction and knocked over an empty table!

"No way!" She changed the wind’s path with a swing of her arm!?

"Then! Vice Freeze!"

I slammed my hand onto the floor. Ice vines shot out across the ground toward her.

"I said it’s too easy!" Jeremy slammed her hand down too and drew an arc on the floor with her finger just as the vines were about to reach her. The vines followed her movement and circled her before heading back toward me!

Crap!

"Flare Arrow!"

I used a low-power fire spell to stop the ice vines.

"...Who are you!?"

"Kekeke... surprised?"

"Of course I am!"

Deflecting a spell’s path... that wasn't something a normal person could do. ...Well, my sister can cut a Dragon Slave with a normal sword... but she’s a special case.

"Heh! By focusing magic into my hands, I can deflect any attack! It’s my original 'Astral Self-Defense'!"

"I see... not bad. Even if the name is super shady."

"Shut up!"

"But if you have a trick like that, you could make a decent living somewhere instead of being on a committee..."

Twitch.

Jeremy’s cheek twitched. I didn't miss it.

"...You didn't think of that, did you...?"

"...Well, I’ll think about it later! Right now, we have a fight to finish! So, what’ll it be!?"

...Hmm... I had a way to break her defense. Actually, she’d already told me the weakness. If she was using magic in her hands to interfere, I could break through by using a spell with overwhelmingly more magic.

But a spell like that would likely kill her or level the whole area. I’d end up arrested.

"Come on! Give it your best shot!" Jeremy stood there defiantly, daring me to attack.

...Wait...

"Hmm. You're pretty good. ...So, I’m just going to ignore you and keep going."

I turned around and bolted out of the inn.

"Wait! We haven't finished... Argh! Get back here!"

Jeremy was a step behind but chased after me. She burst through the door—and found me waiting right there.

"Explosion!"

BOOM!

"Wha—!?"

Caught by surprise with an attack from below, she didn't have time to use her hands to defend. Jeremy was sent flying and knocked out.

"...Phew. That took a while..." Seriously... and it was still early morning...

Anyway, I broke through. Now, on to Klandor City! I turned around—and froze.

About twenty or thirty people were standing there, surrounding me. ...No way... these guys too...

"Heh! Lina Inverse! Seems you beat Jeremy!"

"But I, 'Rosehart of the Silver Tongue,' will give you a proper education!"

"No, me!"

"Me! Me!"

...It felt like the road to Klandor was going to be very long... I felt depressed again.

—But still—

Everything comes to an end eventually. If you keep moving, you’ll get there.

And so, three days after the fight with Jeremy, I finally stepped into Klandor City. I’d lost count of how many committee members I’d beaten, but it was a lot. There couldn't be many left.

The street was wide, with stalls everywhere. At the end of the street was a large building—the Mage Association.

—I finally made it—

But before I went in to have my "talk," I had one more thing to do.

"So you made it here, Lina-kun."

Five figures stood in my way at the entrance to the city. I recognized some of them. Goras Zenomode, the first one sent to me, and Pasha Flanagan, the second.

"I want to say 'well done,' but I can't approve of your attitude of beating up everyone who offers to 'educate' you out of the goodness of their hearts!" Pasha said.

Goras added, "I stepped back once, but I can't just watch you act like this. We, the 425 members of the Disciplinary Committee, are down to just us five."

What!? Only five left!? Yes! I felt like I'd won something! Time to finish this!

"Listen, Lina-kun. People are..."

"Fireball!"

BOOM!

"Gwah!" I didn't want to hear it. My attack sent the last five members flying mid-sentence.

Yes! That's it!

"...Impressive... Lina-san..." Pasha whispered as she fell to the ground. "...You've... grown... except for your chest and height..."

"Dill Brand."

CRACKLE!

"...W-with this..." Oh, she was still alive. "...The 425 members... are finished... But... from here... the 74 Executives of the Disciplinary Committee will stand in your way..."

"...There are *more* of them!?" I fell to my knees in despair...

"Hoho. So you're Lina Inverse..."

"Ice Arrow!"

Shing-shing-shing!

"You finally made it inside the association..."

"Mono Volt!"

Zap-zap-zap!

"But listen well..."

"Raywing Strike!"

Wham!

I plowed through the executives, ignoring everything they said as I fought my way deeper into

the building! Finally, I reached the top floor, in front of a grand door. A brass plate on the wall said "Head’s Office."

Yes! I’m here! I didn't want to get caught by any more pursuers, so I burst through the door!

The room was huge, with marble floors and a large desk covered in papers. A man in a black robe stood by the desk, backlit by the window. He was about thirty, with blonde hair and a face that looked a bit like a fox.

I pointed at him. "You! Are you the head!?"

"...Eh? Oh, no, I’m the secretary..."

"Then where’s the head!?"

"On a business trip."

Flump.

"Eh? Ah? What happened!? Why did you suddenly collapse!? Are you okay!?"

—Of course I’m not okay...

I didn't even have the energy to answer. I just lay there on the cold marble floor and cried.

"...Keke... look at me... Just you wait... I’m going to find him and settle this, no matter where he is!"

My eyes were probably completely glazed over as I walked through the gates of the Roador City Mage Association. The secretary told me the Klandor head was here on business. I’d headed straight for Roador.

After sending those annoying tutors after me and then being "away" when I arrived, I was going to give him a piece of my mind! Of course, more committee members had shown up on the way, but I’d just blasted them all without a word.

"Excuse meeeee."

I tried to be friendly and gave the receptionist a smile.

"Yes! Wh—!" Her customer-service smile froze. "Wh-who might you be?" Her voice was trembling.

Oops. I thought I was giving a friendly smile, but my bloodlust must have been leaking out. Oh well. This might be faster.

"I’m Lina Inverse. Just a quick question: the head of the Klandor association is here, right?"

"E-e-e-e-e-excuse me a moment!" The receptionist frantically looked through some papers. "...Um... it seems he isn't here..."

"Not here!?"

"Hieeee!" I leaned in, and she started sweating. "Y-yes! At least not according to the records! He was here about six months ago, though!"

"...Hmm..." I wondered if I could trust her. Was she lying, or did she really not know? Or... the most likely and most annoying possibility: the secretary in Klandor had lied to me.

I was so mad I hadn't even thought of that... The only way to know was to see him myself, but... Oh, wait. I don't even know what the head looks like...

I looked at the receptionist again. "You said he was here six months ago... do you know what he looks like?"

"Eh... yes... He's about thirty... blonde hair... Oh, and he kind of looked like a fox..."

"....."

"Daaaamn iiiiit!" I clutched my head and screamed, not caring about who was watching.

Crash!

The door burst open, revealing the face I'd seen a few days ago. About thirty, blonde, fox-like face. The self-proclaimed "secretary" was actually the head of the Klandor Mage Association, Casares Donovan.

"Whaaa! You're here!"

"Don't give me that 'whaaa'!" I marched up to him. "Sending those 'tutors' after me and then pretending to be the secretary! You wasted so much of my time! And more committee members kept showing up... If you send any more after me, I'm going to lose it!"

"I'm sorry. I won't send any more." He bowed his head instantly.

...This guy...!

"Don't answer so fast! Haven't you ever heard that 'sorry' doesn't cut it!? In this situation, you're supposed to call your henchmen and resist, then I beat you up to relieve some stress, and *then* you say 'I was wrong'! That's how it works!"

"...I-I don't really get how it works... but I don't want to get hurt, so I figured I'd just apologize early if the result was the same... So, I'm sorry! Forgive me!"

...This old man...!

My anger wasn't going to go away just because of an apology, but if I beat him up now, I'd be the bad guy. No matter how mad I was, I had no choice but to answer:

"...Well... fine... I guess..."

And so, with my anger still simmering, the situation came to an end...

Crash!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! So this is where you were, Lina Inverse! I've been looking everywhere for you!"

The sound of that familiar, obnoxious laugh echoed through the restaurant just as I was finishing my dinner.

Clatter!

Without a word, I kicked back my chair and stood up. Naga didn't even notice the mood I was in and kept talking.

"I haven't been able to eat anything decent because of you. Heh. To make up for it, you can buy me a full-course meal for every meal for the next ten years."

...Kuku... I found it. A place for my anger!

"Don't show up after everything's already over!"

Wham!

My long-range flying kick buried itself right into Naga's head.

A happy ending... or maybe not.

(The Road You Travel...: The End)

Afterword:

Author: Sorry to keep you waiting, it's been a while! And with that, I bring you *Slayers Special* Volume 13: "Looking Up is Annoying"!

L: Phew. It really *has* been a long time, hasn't it?

Author: …Ugh…! W-well, setting that aside, first, an announcement. As promised, this year's New Year's card featured an original drawing by yours truly, Hajime Kanzaka, titled: *"L, Lord of Nightmares Version, but she's 1 year and 8 months old. Featuring Greater Beast and Sea King."*

L: 1... 1 year and 8 months old!?

S: (Picking up the postcard) Whoa. She really is tiny... wait! This...!

Author: Yes. I thought about making the background look more like doodles... maybe I should have used crayons...

S: No, I'm not talking about the background! "Greater Beast" and "Sea King"... these look like nothing more than alley cats with fish in their mouths! Is that really them!?

Author: Yep. Something like that.

L: Is it *really* "something like that"...?

Author: Anyway, let's move past these trivial details!

S: …Are they trivial…?

Author: More importantly! The time has finally come!

L: Ha! That!

S: Yes! That! Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls! Gather 'round and witness! Starting now! We present the results of the *"Survival of the Fittest, Unprecedented! Start slow, then high heat! Turn off the fire when it sizzles, and don't lift the lid even if the baby cries! The 3rd Slayers Popularity Poll"*!

Author: …Why are we using the instructions for cooking perfect rice…?

L: …I'm more concerned about when Subordinate S changed into a glittery tuxedo…

S: Our commentator is the one and only Lord L! And your host is me, Subordinate S! The Author will be the stagehand.

Author: Hold it! A stagehand in a text-only medium... does that mean I don't get a turn!?

S: No, no, please feel free to speak as much as you like. Just do it facing that wall over there.

Author: ……

L: Oh. He actually went to the wall.

S: He's surprisingly honest. It's quite charming.

L: Is... is it...?

S: Well, leaving that guy aside, after thousands of years of tallying, here are the results of the popularity poll! First, announcing **10th Place**! 10th Place is... none other than me, **Subordinate S**! 385 votes!

L: You're starting with yourself!?

Author: (Voice from a distance, barely caught by the mic) Talk about self-promotion...

L: Whoa, that startled me! Was that a ghost!?

S: Well... it would be weird to start with 9th or 11th place.

L: Hmph... fine. Then moving on to **9th Place**!

S: Yes! 9th Place, the lovely but terrifying inhabitant of the monster realm, everyone's favorite White Serpent, **Naga**! 452 votes! And **8th Place**, will she ever actually show up!? The big sister from home, **Luna Inverse**! 628 votes! Above her at **7th Place** is the TV *TRY* original—midriff-baring, slender-waisted, and sultry-eyed—the half-demon, half-dragon **Valgaav**! Total votes: 928!

L: Hoho. It looks like 9th and 10th just swapped places, but not much else has moved.

Author: (Whispering) …Valgaav did his best… (The rest is too quiet for the mic).

S: Ignore the haunting. Moving on to **6th Place**! As long as justice is protected, everything is fine! Active in the side story of this very volume, the space-warping, steel-crushing **Princess Amelia**! 1,340 votes!

The Sakuras: *Clap clap clap clap*... (Applause)

L: Ugh. He brought a weird group of people with him again.

S: Now, let's go live to Amelia-san at the Saillune Royal Magic Library. Reporter Beastmaster General North-san? …… (Silence) S-S: …North-san? …… (More silence) S: …Er, it seems our reporter North-san has been kicked out. Well, he *is* a monster, after all.

L: …Is that okay…? A Beastmaster General…? Or rather, a monster…?

S: Well, since a comment from Lady Amelia is impossible, let's move on. **5th Place**! Just one step behind Gourry! Basically cool but a bit of a prankster, the Magic Swordsman **Zelgadiss**! 2,077 votes!

The Sakuras: *Clap clap clap clap...*

S: By the way, Zelgadiss-san is currently missing, so we couldn't get a report. And **4th Place**! "Lina, is dinner ready yet!?" Lina's guardian and genius swordsman, **Gourry Gabriev**! Total votes: 2,379!

The Sakuras: *Clap clap...*

L: Enough of that! Author! You're being annoying, get back over here!

Author: Alright! I'm back!

L: He's suddenly energetic... oh well. Next. Next.

S: Er, regarding Gourry-san, we determined it was impossible to get a coherent comment, so we have skipped his interview.

Author: …How cruel…

S: And **3rd Place**! The day has finally come! Achieving her dream of entering the top three! Our idol, Mother of Darkness! The arrogant afterword woman! **Lord L**! 4,184 votes!

L: Yay! Woo-hoo! …Wait, did you just slip something rude in there?

S: How does it feel? You didn't get 1st, but you made the top three. Any thoughts?

L: …Ah... well, let's see... (786 hours of commentary cut here) ...And that's about it. …Wait! Why was my comment cut!?

S: …Well... we ran out of space...

L: In that case, you should cut the main text to fit my comment! That's what "sincerity" looks like!

Author: What kind of sincerity is that? …Anyway… who is **2nd Place**!?

S: Yes! The day has finally come! Thou art defeated! **Lina Inverse**! Total votes: 5,147!

Author & L: Ooooooooooh!

S: The theory that "The protagonist cannot keep 1st place in a popularity poll forever" holds true! Now, let's check in with Lina-san, who is on a heartbroken trip to Nishinakajima-Minamigata! Take it away!

Lina: …Hmph… Well, humans can't stay at the top forever. It's not like I get a prize for being 1st anyway... Being 2nd is fine. I'm grateful. Thanks.

S: That was Lina Inverse-san, currently binge-eating kimchi fried rice at a BBQ joint! It seems she's actually pretty frustrated.

Author: …Which means…

L: 1st Place is obviously!?

Author: Some weird bug clinging to the underside of a rock!?

L: As if! …Though, that kind of development *would* be very "Slayers-esque" in a way...

S: And so, **1st Place**! Shady smiles and atrocious deeds! The sad middle manager! Everyone's idol, Beast Priest **Xellos**! 6,359 votes!

Author & L: WAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!

S: Let's go straight to the broadcast! Xellos-san, currently on a business trip in front of the Amagasaki Center Pool!

Author: …Where do these people even go... wait, I actually know that place...

Xellos: My, my. Hahaha. This is quite a turn of events. Honestly, surpassing *That Person* makes me feel a slight sense of mortal danger... but regardless, this is all thanks to everyone who voted. As a thank you, if you ever request it, I'll be sure to destroy you as painlessly as possible. Best regards.

Author: …That's not a very celebratory comment. (Backing away slightly)

L: …Well... he is a monster...

S: For reference, here are the rankings from 11th down: 11th is Filia from TV *TRY*, followed by Beastmaster General Sherra and Chaos Dragon Gaav. Hellmaster Phibrizzo is next, followed by Sylphiel at 15th. Then Greater Beast Zelas Metallium, the blade-obsessed Remy, and the Author. Salina from the movie, and **Luke** at 20th. For reference, 20th place Luke had 145 votes. 21st place was "Piko-Piko Lina-chan" from the movie, trailing Luke by only a dozen votes. If the tallying period had shifted slightly, the top 20 might have looked very different.

Author: Hmm. I see. So, unlike the second poll, without the "minus votes" from anti-fans, Xellos was overwhelming.

L: Hmm. It seems my core fanbase has finally solidified too.

Author: Though some of them are dogs and cats.

S: In any case, that concludes the 3rd Popularity Poll without further incident. (L smiles brightly and turns around).

L: And *so*. Back during the mid-term tally, you guys were saying all sorts of things like, "She won't be able to touch us until the voting is over," weren't you?

Author: ……!

S: Y-you remembered that!? Still!?

L: Pretty much.

Author: …Wait, hold on!

S: T-that gold-colored hacksaw in your hand... what is it for?

L: What do you think?

Author: C-could it be—

Static.

(Sound of the broadcast cutting out. A long silence.)

Click.

L: Well then, everyone, thank you for sticking with us through the "3rd Slayers Popularity Poll"! See you in the next story!

(L waves with a sunny smile. The other two are gone, and their voices are no longer heard. In the wind, there is a faint scent, similar to iron rust—)

—Curtain—

Afterword: The End